FASHIONABLE LIFE;

OR,

PARIS AND LONDON.

BY

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AUTHOR OF

"THE LIFE AND ADVENTURES OF A CLEVER WOMAN"

"THE BARNABYS," &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES

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CHAPTER I.

The life of Clara Holmwood, as far as it had yet gone, had, upon the whole, been peaceful and prosperous. Had it not been for the blunder committed by her father, in placing her in the hands of Dr. Brixbourg, and her own greater blunder still, in conveying an intimation of attachment on her part to a young gentleman who had not conveyed any intimation of the same kind to her,—had it not been for these two very lamentable blunders, it would have been more peaceful, and more prosperous still. Nevertheless, she was not only

contented with her destiny, such as it was, but would have considered herself a very guilty creature had she not felt deeply thankful for the blessings she enjoyed.

But, in truth, she had never guessed how very much happier she could be, till she was at length permitted to exercise her talents, and execute her will, in the delightful task of preparing an enjoyable home for a friend who was dear to her

Lady Amelia Wharton would have been greatly surprized, and greatly shocked, too, had she been aware how painful to Clara's nature had been the restraint which her own dread of profiting too largely by the great wealth and generous spirit of the city heiress had inflicted on her

Conscious of her own ignorance of everything relating to the customs and etiquettes established among persons of rank, and made painfully sensible, by her own unfortunate adventure, that her own opinions could not be applied, as a test of right and wrong, to the conduct or the feelings of those born and educated in a higher class than herself, Clara had

restrained a multitude of kind and generous feelings, and refused herself the indulgence of many elegant whims, from the dread of appearing ostentatiously extravagant, or, what she felt would be worse still, presumptuously generous.

But now she contrived to make it appear so evident to her conscientious ladyship, that all she was doing was for the purpose of embellishing a residence which she constantly declared she never wished to quit, that all scruples concerning expenditure seemed to have given way; and accordingly, Clara was now for the first time enjoying the indulgence of a taste which could not have been more really elegant and refined, had she derived the wealth which enabled her to indulge it from acres that had come to her through a dozen descents.

My heroine had certainly never looked so lovely as she did on the day that *Monsieur and Madame Victor Dormont* returned from their wedding excursion to their *home*,—their elegant, highly-furnished, and most commodious HOME.

Lady Amelia, too, was in no state to medi-

tate upon the question of whose gold it was that had prepared such a paradise for her darling; and as she gazed on the bright young face of Annie, as she sat down in the exquisite arm-chair which had been provided for her in her elegant *boudoir* (the *ci-devant* morning-room of Clara), her ladyship certainly forgot everything but the delight of seeing her there

. Nay, even when the pretty bride, after deliberately reviewing with her bright happy eyes all the elegant things with which she was surrounded, exclaimed, as she threw her arms round Clara after the survey, "And this is what you have prepared for me instead of the grim *troisième* that I almost beat you for objecting to"—not even *then* did Lady Amelia appear capable of feeling any sensation but pleasure.

As to the young Victor, he certainly did appear rather too happy to know very distinctly what he was about, for he seized upon aunt Sarah, who gently stood looking on with eyes that overflowed with tears of happiness as she gazed, and performed a *tour de waltz* with her

round the room, which concluded by his giving her a hearty kiss.

But the greatest of Clara's triumphs was reserved for a *tête-à-tête* conversation which she held with Lady Amelia on the following morning, in the *ci-devant* third drawing-room, now converted into a *boudoir* as perfect, even, as that now occupied by Annie

Clara watched the critical, and, perhaps, anxious eye, of her noble friend, as it deliberately examined the room, as if to discover whether there were any deficiency, or any reason to fear that the personal comfort of Clara had been sacrificed for the pleasure or convenience of her friend.

But no; the very keenest examination could detect no deficiency, and the smile with which the elder lady replied to the inquiring glance of the younger, showed very decidedly that she was satisfied.

"Do you perceive that I have made a melancholy sacrifice of myself at the shrine of friendship, Lady Amelia?" said Clara, laughing.

"No, my dear, you have not," replied her ladyship, gravely; "but I am willing to say

more than that, Clara," she added, earnestly. "But you must behave generously, and not be unmercifully triumphant, if I come to your feet with a confession. We have both of us, I think, behaved in a very quiet lady-like way, and have never permitted a single word too strong to be civil to pass between us; but yet we have been fighting a battle, Clara, ever since we have been together. You have been constantly endeavouring to embellish our existence, and I, as constantly, have been endeavouring to prevent you. I am now, my dear, going very candidly to confess, that in all this you have been right, and I have been wrong, and I am now really very sorry and repentant for having so tormented you. Will you forgive me?"

"Forgive you, dear Lady Amelia!" returned Clara, colouring, and not looking very directly in the face of her friend—"Forgive you? What a word! What can you mean?"

"I mean, Clara, that I have been unceasingly using my influence to prevent your indulging yourself by surrounding us all with a multitude of elegances, all conducive to

enjoyment, and as perfectly within your reach as the buying a pincushion is within mine. I have impeded your wish of making this very rational use of your superabundant wealth, because I felt sure that it was more for my sake than your own, that you were anxious to make our dwelling all that you have *now* made it; and a feeling which I mistook for delicacy, and almost for honesty, rendered me the very ungracious being you have so often found me. But now, my dearest Clara, I more than suspect that this fine abnegation of self, which I really and sincerely cherished as a virtue, was, after all, nothing but *pride*, and very vulgar pride, too. I am now fully awakened to the disagreeable conviction, that you must have suffered—positively suffered—my dear friend, from having an imagination so fertile, and a taste so elegant, perpetually kept in fetters, for fear that I should feel *too* much indebted to you! Indeed I have been very wrong! Can you forgive me?"

"One must be made of very impenetrable stuff, not to feel that your present accordance and indulgence, with and for all my whims and

all my wishes, overpay a hundred-fold all my by-gone little vexations," replied Clara, embracing her.

* * * *

And this was, in fact, most perfectly true. The temper of Clara did not lead her to find any bitterness in restraint beyond what was produced by the privation of the wished-for whim, and as this privation had never deprived her of any indulgence which did not fairly come under that denomination (although the epithets *beautiful*, *graceful*, *elegant*, might have been fairly enough assigned to each and all), she had not suffered any vexation on the subject which was not now over-paid, a thousand-fold, by the present licensed indulgence.

Why is it that a teller of stories finds it so much easier to describe sorrow than joy? If the human beings whose adventures we are recording have in any way been the victims of sorrow, what a tide of woes comes rushing to the ready pen at once, as we set about giving a sketch of their unfortunate condition. But no sooner do the characters of the drama pre-

sent themselves under happy circumstances, than we find the record halt.

This is not an amiable trait, I am afraid, in the mental condition of story recounters; but it very certainly is a fact with the majority of us.

A more happy set of human beings were, perhaps, never brought together to constitute one family, than was now formed by Lady Amelia Wharton, Clara Holmwood, Victor Dormont, his wife Annie, and their loving old friend, "Aunt Sarah"

But having stated this pleasant fact, I really feel at a loss what next to tell my readers about them.

Days, weeks, and months glided smoothly over them, and found them happy—happy—happy still.

And then came the crowning joy of being told, upon the best authority, that Annie, although she certainly was looking rather pale, had nothing at all the matter with her which need cause them the least uneasiness, excepting that it might be found convenient, ere long, to look about, in order to discover in some part

of the premises an additional room, rather more particularly warm and comfortable than any at present in use.

As it had not occurred to either of the four females, for whose accommodation the house had been taken, that such an apartment was likely to be necessary, it now seemed to occur to them all simultaneously, that it might be very difficult to find such. But Clara, upon this occasion, again felt conscious that she had sometimes a gift of "seeing things that were not yet in sight," and under the influence of this occult sort of inspiration, she contrived to be left at home upon a certain day, when Lady Amelia and her daughter were taking a constitutional walk in the Tuileries, and employed the time of their absence in asking "questions she had never asked before."

She had made herself too thoroughly acquainted (when engaged upon a voyage of discovery before Annie's marriage) with all the upper part of their dwelling, to waste any more time upon it now; but she zealously set about a very diligent inquiry as to what might be found concealed behind sundry doors on

the *rez-de-chaussee;* and after being assured by the official whom she had selected to attend her, that she would find nothing but places for the reception of rubbish, she made discovery of two by no means very tiny apartments, which she instantly determined to convert into the most perfect day and night nursery that it was possible to imagine. And then, once again, gentle reader, my heroine became much too happy for me to do justice to her feelings in words.

For did she not see in her mind's eye her dearly-beloved little friend, Annie, smiling with maternal rapture as she bent over the minature bed in one part of the room; while Lady Amelia stood looking on with a charming mixture of pleasure and astonishment, as she contemplated a perfection of nursery arrangement, which seemed more like the handiwork of good fairies than the contrivance of a young beauty, who might have been forgiven had she been thinking more about her own toilet than that of an unborn baby.

Such and so great, however, was the happiness of my heroine, as all this went on and

prospered, that the only way of doing justice to her feelings is by saying that she had never felt so perfectly happy before in the whole course of her life.

And then came the anticipated and fondly longed-for little stranger, and a new and deep-felt joy beamed, as it were, on all their hearts.

No two members of the family met each other that their eyes did not seem mutually to wish each other joy And then the christening came, and there was more joy.

The baby was a little girl, and there was a good deal of affectionate disputing as to which of the two godmothers was to give its name At length it was agreed that they should both have this honour; and the baby (the prettiest, of course, beyond all comparison, that ever was seen) received the names of Amelia Clara. And the babe's health was drank in sparkling champagne; and when the gay family party laid down to repose themselves after their happy day, it would have been really a matter of considerable difficulty for the most imaginative and gayest-tempered person in the

world to have hit upon any expedient capable of increasing the measureless contentment of the party assembled at their gay, though very domestic christening; it is no wonder, then, that their historian, having stated as a fact that the records of happiness do not easily supply any very elaborate details, should leave this succinct statement without lengthening it by repeated descriptions of its perfection.

CHAPTER II.

It is not a gay task, even for such an idle story-teller as myself, to turn from such a scene as I have described above, in order to exhibit the happy actors in it under circumstances very painfully different, but, to use again a very expressive transatlantic phrase, "I have got to do it."

The little Clara (for it was by her second name that she was usually called) had not fully achieved the dignity of being able to walk alone, when her young father, who had proudly proclaimed himself, and not without some show of justice, as the most skilful among her many instructors in the art, was

observed to become somewhat remiss in his performance of this pleasant task.

Aunt Sarah explained this by declaring that Victor had gone on urging the baby to perform feats of such dangerous hardihood, that he had become terrified himself, at the result of his own lessons; but Lady Amelia declared that it was only a symptom of masculine inconstancy.

Annie gave a very different interpretation to it. "He has made baby so much fonder of himself than of any one else," she said, "that I have sometimes felt a little jealous, and I do really believe that Victor has found this out, and has given up the office he so dearly loved, in order that I might succeed to it."

But my heroine did not agree in opinion with either of them. She fondly loved her dear Annie's little treasure, and had there been a dearth, instead of a superfluity of nurses, to attend her, she would have shown herself a very zealous auxiliary. But as it would have been nearly impossible for her to take possession of her little namesake for a single moment, without feeling that the darling plaything was

longed for by somebody else; she was more a looker-on than an active agent in the scenes wherein "*baby*" bore a part; and her interpretation of Victor's relaxed activity in giving her walking lessons, differed greatly from that of her friends.

She saw, or fancied she saw, that Victor was out of spirits; and this idea was so painful to her, that she positively wished to persuade herself that he was ill, rather than permit herself to believe that he was unhappy.

Whatever the cause of the change which she remarked in him, she had the deep pain of perceiving that, as days and weeks rolled on, this change became more and more obvious to her; nor was it very long before the other members of the family perceived it also; but they all agreed in declaring that Victor was unwell.

He had lost his appetite, and therefore they said it was evident that he was feverish, and then an earnest contest arose upon the propriety of calling in medical advice.

Clara's heart ached for him, as she witnessed the struggle in his mind, between the vexatious

necessity of submitting his pulse, and his tongue, to the examination of a physician, or of confessing to the unsuspicious beings who were now his family, that he was suffering from mental anxiety.

But though perfectly sure that the malady which had produced the change which was every day becoming more evident, was mental and not bodily, Clara was as much at a loss to guess the cause as the simple-minded aunt Sarah herself. It was quite evident to her that Lady Amelia was uneasy about him, but by no means equally so, that her ladyship was as fully aware as she felt herself to be, that it was not his bodily health which had caused the change.

This feeling of uncertainty respecting the state of her friend's mind, upon a subject so very important, was inexpressibly painful to Clara; but she lacked the courage necessary to entering openly and candidly on the subject. One reason for this reluctant feeling arose from the persuasion that, however unreservedly they might converse together, concerning the altered demeanour of Victor, they

had neither of them the power of throwing any light upon the cause of it.

It was, no doubt, this conviction which, after many not very pleasant night thoughts, at length determined Clara to avoid all discussion on the subject with Lady Amelia, till she had herself obtained sufficient light upon it to assist the judgment of her friend, instead of leading it astray.

But how was such light to be got at? Where was it to be sought for? More night-thoughts were had recourse to, before this question was answered. At length, it occurred to her, that the best person she could apply to on the subject, was Sir William Lawrence. Many obvious reasons seemed to conspire to make this choice of an adviser desirable. His long and well-known affection for Victor, and the familiar intimacy which, despite the disparity of age, had made them such almost constant companions, pointed him out as the individual most likely to be acquainted with the cause of the young man's anxiety, if any such really existed, while his near relationship to Victor's wife, gave the

best possible assurance of his being as deeply interested on the subject as ever Clara herself could be.

The only obstacle to her immediately acting upon the idea which her anxious meditations thus suggested, arose from the difficulty of seeing Sir William alone.

His nearly constant habit of dining with them daily, had been confirmed, rather than weakened by the marriage of Annie, but this afforded no opportunity for the sort of conversation which she now wished to hold with him.

It would have been exceedingly easy for her to write upon a scrap of paper, "*call upon me in the back drawing-room, at eleven o'clock to-morrow,*" and to have slipped the said scrap into the hands of the friendly old gentleman, when it was extended to take leave of her for the night; but she thought it so extremely likely that upon feeling a note put into his hands, he should immediately have recourse to the table-lamp, in order to read it aloud, for the good of the company, that she dared not try the experiment.

But fortune favoured her; for having left

the drawing-room for a moment, she returned to it exactly when he was taking his leave, and stepping rapidly up to him as he was in the act of passing through the door, she extended her hand to him as a token of farewell, saying, as she retained his for a moment, "Will you let me see you in this room for a few minutes alone, to-morrow morning, after breakfast?"

Though probably not much in the habit, at present, of making clandestine appointments with young ladies, the good-natured baronet replied to her request, by an acquiescent nod, and then, very discreetly, took his leave

The anxious Clara was not made to wait long on the following morning for the *tête-à-tête* conversation, from which she hoped, at least, to derive information, if not comfort, and in this she was not disappointed. There was a sort of constitutional dislike to all business-like subjects in Sir William Lawrence, of which all his intimate friends and connexions were so much aware, that no theme, capable of being so interpreted, was ever discussed before him.

This fact had become particularly well known to Clara, by Lady Amelia's careful avoidance of all such subjects when he was present, during the anxious period which preceded the marriage of Annie. She therefore wisely determined to avoid everything like discussion, and to seek the information she so anxiously wished to obtain by a direct question which he could neither evade, nor misunderstand.

"What is your pleasure, my fair lady?" were the first words of the old gentleman as he entered.

"I want you to tell me," she replied, "the cause of Victor Dormont's being so sadly out of spirits."

And there she stopped.

The kind-hearted old man seemed pushed by the direct form of her question, into the painful predicament of being obliged to give an answer. The almost habitual smile of his comely features gave place to a painful expression far unlike any she had ever seen them wear before, and this change of countenance was followed by what was more striking

still, for he took her hand very gravely, and led her to the sofa, seating himself beside her in a manner which showed plainly enough, that he had no intention of dismissing the question she had asked, in the usually light tone in which, as she well knew, he was accustomed to treat everything. "You ask me a difficult question, Miss Holmwood, and a painful one too. But I am glad it is *you* who have asked it," he replied, very gravely. "Your generous, your constant kindness to my nieces," he continued, affectionately taking her hand, "make it impossible that I should consider you as a stranger; and yet, my dear young lady, with all your kindness, it is easier for me to speak to you respecting this puzzling change in the aspect and manners of our dear Victor, than it would be for me to speak about it to them. I cannot understand it, Miss Holmwood."

"Have you never been tempted to put the question to the young man himself, Sir William?" said Clara, looking anxiously at him.

"*Tempted*, my dear Miss Clara," replied

the old man, shaking his head—"we are often *tempted* to do things that we like to do, better, perhaps, than is quite wise and reasonable. But I never, in my life, felt tempted to do what I disliked."

"I confess, Sir William," replied Clara with a smile, in which there was not much gaiety, "I confess that the word I have used is not very appropriate, but yet I think that there might have been something like temptation, in the wish you must have felt to be made acquainted with everything concerning one so nearly and dearly connected with you."

"Yes .... that is a very natural idea, my dear But I am almost ashamed to confess to you, that I shrink from the thoughts of hearing from the lips of my dear, gay, light-hearted Victor, the confession that he has some anxiety upon his mind which makes him miserable"

"Believe me, Sir William," she replied, "I fully appreciate the affectionate kindness of the temper which occasions this reluctance, and if the gay *garcon* Victor Dormont were a *garcon* still, I should probably agree with you in

thinking that there would be little wisdom, and less kindness, in urging him to communicate an annoyance which his charming temper would be so likely to treat lightly, if not made to dwell upon it by others. But the case is widely different now. The happiness of Annie, and of her mother, as well as the interest of his child, may all be compromised, if any real cause of anxiety exists, which he may not have the power of removing himself, nor the courage to communicate to his friends."

"Heaven forbid, my dear Miss Clara, that any such misery should threaten us!" exclaimed the old gentleman, very earnestly.

"That Victor looks ill, and appears greatly less gay than formerly, can scarcely be denied by any one who observes him attentively," he continued; "but may not this be accounted for by the new position in which he is placed? Hitherto, if I understand the matter rightly, he has been merely a clerk, and his duties probably consisted wholly of overlooking accounts, or writing letters, the contents of which were specified to him by his superiors; but now he has the position of a partner in

this great concern, and he must, of course, feel not only a deeper interest, but also a greater degree of anxiety."

"That is quite true, dear sir!" replied Clara. "But yet, I should have thought," she added, "that this change, to an active, intelligent mind like his, must have brought more of pleasure than of pain; but Victor does not only look fatigued—he looks unhappy."

"He does! There is no denying it!" returned Sir William, looking extremely unhappy himself, as he acknowledged the justice of her statement. But how is it possible that there can be any cause for it? Have I not known Roche most intimately for years? Have I not been accustomed to see him amidst the best society in Paris, both English and French? Why, my dear Miss Holmwood, his picture gallery, in the Place Vendôme, is a perfect mine of wealth. I have been told, over and over again, that he might sell his collection of pictures for twice as much in London as he is said to have given for them here. It is perfectly idle, therefore, to torment ourselves by any doubts and fears respecting the prosperous

condition of the fine concern to which Victor has been admitted."

"Is it not possible, Sir William," said Clara, "that Victor may find himself in a more laborious position than he anticipated before he was made a partner? He certainly contrived to lead a very gay life before this much wished-for partnership was obtained for him. It would be sadly mortifying to think that his having at length obtained what he so very earnestly desired, should have caused this painful change from high health and light-hearted gaiety, to the languid looks and saddened tone which we witness now."

"It would, indeed, Miss Holmwood!" replied the old gentleman, covering his eyes with his hand, as if he could thereby shut out the painful image she had placed before him.

"But the fact is, my dear Miss Clara," he added, after the silence of a minute or two, "the fact is, that we none of us know exactly what his actual situation is. We all know, well enough, that when he was head clerk to this great concern, that he *was* a clerk, and

nothing else. Never for a moment did the dear boy attempt to deceive any of us, upon that point."

"Indeed, you do him but justice in saying so," replied Clara, earnestly. "On the contrary, he not only stated the fact too explicitly to leave any one in doubt upon it, but he made Lady Amelia understand, much more clearly than she would ever have done without his assistance, that his station was *not* such a one as could justify his proposing to Annie."

"You do him justice, Miss Holmwood. Your statement is most correctly true, and this is one of the traits of character exhibited during the course of my long and intimate knowledge of him, which gave me such perfect confidence in him," replied Sir William, warmly

"But this very truth and sincerity, on one point," he added, after a moment's pause, "this very truth and sincerity make it only the more difficult to understand, why there should be so much reserve about him now. Perhaps, my dear, you are not aware that I am, at this very moment, quite as ignorant as you are, as to the terms on which he has been admitted as a

partner in this great concern? But it is the fact, I assure you. I have not forgot, and we shall none of us ever forget, your noble wedding gift to your young friend," continued the old man, affectionately taking her hand, "nor have I been left in ignorance respecting any of the circumstances connected with it. I know, that in the first instance, it was proposed to obtain Victor's admission to the company, by the addition of this money to the common fund; and I know, also, that Annie's mother, with very natural and proper anxiety for her child, desired that this most unexpected provision should be secured to Annie and her children, beyond the reach of any commercial risk whatever.

"This was, of course, at once agreed to by Victor; and it was thus that matters stood, when I set off upon my last trip to England. Upon my return, I certainly expressed something like disapproval at the idea of permitting the marriage to take place before the young man obtained a distinct position in the firm, and I had more than one long and very friendly discussion with Monsieur Roche upon the

subject, and then I left Paris again for a day or two, and when I returned I was told by our good friend, Roche, that means had been found to get Victor into the concern, without his selling his own dearly-beloved pictures, or Lady Amelia's giving up the settlement which had been made upon her daughter; and beyond this, I know nothing, Victor never having told me any particulars whatever, respecting the terms upon which he had been received into the concern."

"You are intimately acquainted with Monsieur Roche, are you not?" said Clara, in a tone which caused Sir William Lawrence to look at her rather earnestly.

"Intimately acquainted with Roche, my dear?" he replied. "Yes, to be sure, I am," he added. "He is one of the most intimate friends I have in the world, my dear Miss Clara! What made you ask the question, young lady?"

"Because, if you know him well," returned Clara, "I think you must be able to judge whether there was any danger of the young man's having been admitted through his agency,

in any way that might place him still in an inferior position."

"Not the least in the world, my dear Miss Clara," replied Sir William. "I don't think Roche could be more fond of the boy if he were his own son; and he is not the sort of man, I can tell you, to suffer a *protegé* of his to be treated disrespectfully. No! That can't be it."

"Monsieur Roche is considered to be a very wealthy man, I believe, is he not?" said Clara, in a tone which again caused Sir William to look at her earnestly.

For a moment he did so in perfect silence, and then he said, rather abruptly, "What in the world have you got into your head, my dear?"

But this sudden question did not receive an immediate answer. Clara's eyes were fixed upon the ground, and perhaps she did not perceive how earnestly Sir William Lawrence was looking at her. At length, however, she replied,—

"I can give no reply to your question, Sir

William. I do not myself know what I am thinking of. But I know better what I am feeling. I am anxious about my friends, my dear sir; very anxious. If Victor is unhappy, our dear Annie will not long remain otherwise."

And after she had said this, they both remained for some moments without speaking "Do you think it possible," said Clara, at length—"do you think it possible, Sir William, that this magnificent concern of which we have heard so much, can be within reach of failing . . . of becoming ruined and bankrupt?"

"Possible? Miss Holmwood!" replied the old man, knitting his brows, and looking very greatly annoyed, "possible? All things are possible; but if you mean to ask me whether I think such an event in the very slightest degree *probable*, I distinctly and confidently answer, NO."

"I receive your opinion," she replied, "not only with pleasure, but with confidence, and I think our best and kindest course will be not to notice this apparent change in the

look and manner of Victor. It surely may be very possible that the business thrown upon him now, may be of a much more responsible, and therefore of a more anxious kind, than any which occupied him when he was merely a clerk in the concern. At any rate, Sir William, I strongly advise our saying nothing on the subject, either to Annie herself, or to her mother. I would not shrink from doing either, were there the least chance of obtaining any information from them, which might, by possibility, be useful; but it would be folly to hope for this, Sir William. They would neither of them conceal either from you or from me, any fact they knew respecting Victor, of sufficient importance to affect either his health or spirits . . . And if, unhappily," she added, after pausing for a moment, "if unhappily any thing of the sort really exists, and that he has succeeded in concealing it from them, there would be little either of wisdom or kindness, I think, in our informing them of it."

"Most true! most true!" murmured the old gentleman, in a cautious whisper, as if

fearing that the walls might become too well acquainted with their suspicions.

And then they parted, their hand-shaking having a grave earnestness in it, which expressed fully as much anxiety as their words

CHAPTER III.

Scarcely had Sir William left the house, when a messenger arrived from the nursery department, earnestly requesting Miss Holmwood to have the great kindness to go down upon a visit to that most important part of the establishment. "Because," as the messenger added, with a countenance expressive of almost solemn interest and anxiety, "both my mistress and the Lady Amelia have something very particular indeed that they wish to communicate to Mademoiselle."

The heart of poor Clara gave a bound that made her gasp for breath. "It is come then!"

she exclaimed in French, fixing her anxious eyes on the countenance of the messenger.

"*Mais oui!* Mademoiselle! it is come!" replied the girl, who never missed an opportunity of "speaking English" whenever she could do it safely.

Clara rose from her chair in order to obey the summons, but sat down again in the hope of recovering something like an appearance of composure; but she literally trembled from head to foot. She knew not exactly what she feared, but there was no relief in this. The very fact of Sir William Lawrence's being evidently as much in the dark as herself, had tended rather to increase her fears than to lessen them. For she knew the very affectionate and familiar intimacy which subsisted between them, and could only account for a reserve, which, while it failed to conceal poor Victor's uneasy state of mind, had prevented him from asking the consolation of sympathy, by supposing that he dreaded the result of an open disclosure.

It was, therefore, very literally in fear and trembling, that she obeyed this summons to

the presence of Lady Amelia and her daughter; but no sooner had she passed the nursery door, than she perceived, very greatly to her surprize, and equally so to her relief, that she had been summoned to share in a community of pleasure and not of pain

In the low chair, which assumes in every nursery the pre-eminent dignity of a throne, sat Lady Amelia Wharton, with the laughing, kicking little Clara sprawling on her lap. On one side of her stood Annie, with her sweet face expressive of the most radiant glee, and on the other, the nurse, with an air rather of triumph than of mere passive contentment.

Did I not say so, Miss Holmwood?" said this personage, who was a very dignified Englishwoman. "Don't you remember, ma'am, that I said so from the very first? The very moment that I perceived that the back gums began to swell, I was positive sure that the back teeth were coming And here they are, ma'am, as clear as the sun at noonday It is quite wonderful, to be sure, to see how very young mammas do torment themselves about the back teeth! I do believe that my young

missis began in her heart to misdoubt their ever coming at all, just because they happen to be a little late. But we sha'n't have no more terrors and fears on that score, I hope."

Poor Clara was by no means insensible to the joy occasioned by this important and anxiously looked-for event, but it required considerable self-command on her part to exhibit all the sympathy that Annie evidently expected. "Oh, Clara, dearest!" exclaimed the young mother, shaking her curls very solemnly, "I don't believe that you have the least idea of the extreme importance of having these dreadful double back-teeth safely through!"

Clara loved her friend Annie much too affectionately to be indifferent to the happiness expressed in the radiant smile with which she greeted her, but it was a dismal *arrière pensée* which brought back to her recollection the fears which had made her tremble as she obeyed the summons.

Having made her visit to the nursery sufficiently long to obviate any suspicion that she was in a hurry to leave it, she said some-

thing about being very busy up stairs, kissed the mother and the child very affectionately, and then retreated again to the room that was now more sacred to her melancholy musings, than to the studies which she used to pursue there.

The situation of Clara at this time was indeed extremely painful. The more carefully she watched the demeanour of Victor, the more she became convinced that he was suffering from some secret anxiety. It was also perfectly evident to her, that let it be of what nature it would, it was *not* such as he conceived it his duty to communicate either to his wife, or her mother, or her uncle.

The conviction that this was the case, decidedly increased her uneasiness, till it occurred to her that there was nothing in the character of Victor to justify her in believing that if the cause of his uneasiness was likely to be enduring, he would rob himself of the consolation of their sympathy and advice, when the doing so only added to his own embarrassments, without affording any rational hope that those he loved would be

spared from eventually suffering, as the result of his excluding them from his confidence.

"It is only his reluctance to give us pain which occasions this painful reserve," was the conclusion at which she arrived; and then her meditations fixed themselves upon the difficult question of how she might best lead him to speak freely to her upon what it was *now* so evidently his object to conceal.

My poor heroine herself was far from being quite at ease in her mind upon a subject, which delicacy to others, and not reserve on her own account, had induced her to conceal. To the best of her knowledge and belief, not a single human being had any idea of the step she had taken to ensure the inscription of Victor's name as a partner in the concern, save herself and Monsieur Roche.

It had been made clear to her at the time of this transaction, that the assistance requested of her was, that she should lend her name as security, on the part of Victor Dormont, for the sum of ten thousand pounds.

She well remembered feeling, during the hurried moments of this short interview with

M. Roche, that she would have preferred giving over an order upon her London bankers for this amount, and that she had been only prevented from doing so, by remembering the flushed cheeks and painful excitement of Lady Amelia, when expressing her averseness to the idea of "purchasing" a husband for her daughter. The signature which M Roche had asked for in their hurried interview, and which she had given, without scruple, appeared to her, at the moment, as a very happy means of securing the marriage of her dear, love-stricken Annie, without disobeying the behests of her lady mother, and it would have been difficult to have found a happier being than my loving heroine, at the moment when M. Roche exclaimed, as he took the paper she had signed into his hands—"Now then Victor is to all intents and purposes a *partner* in this noble concern, and no more a *clerk* than I am"

But now, on recalling all the particulars of this short and hurried interview, she felt a sort of vague uncertainty as to the importance of the signature she had given Had her good

father been one of the egotistical money-makers who feel pride and pleasure in expatiating at his fireside upon his own skill in collecting wealth, or the most of it, either from idleness or imprudence, among his less successful friends and acquaintance. Clara might have acquired a few more practical ideas respecting the pecuniary transactions among human beings than she now possessed, and which might have been very useful to her.

But the judicious and steadily successful corn-merchant made it a principle to divide his day very strictly between business and the absence of it, and would no more have talked about the purchase of stock or the drawing of bills, while enjoying his evening tea or his backgammon-board, than he would have discoursed about throwing doublets in Mark Lane.

There were, moreover, other causes which had contributed to keep Clara more ignorant of all the details connected with money transactions, than the generality of intelligent persons of either sex.

The fulsome admiration paid by the Brix-

bourg family to her wealth had left an exaggerated feeling of aversion on her mind towards the subject; and though last, not least, perhaps, was the effect which her overgrown fortune had produced on Henry Hamilton, and which had left an impression on her mind that led her to sign her checks and pay her bills, with less devotion of time or thought, than reasonable people usually bestow on such affairs.

From the time of her important, but very hurried interview with Monsieur Roche (now very nearly two years ago) up to the hour when her present anxiety concerning Victor began to trouble her, she had positively never once thought of what had passed between them, or remembered anything more concerning it, than that it was the happy moment which decided the union of the two dear beings whose love to each other seemed to increase as each succeeding day passed over them.

But now, poor Clara, for the first time in her life, began to feel anxious about money matters. Was it possible, after all they had heard from Sir William Lawrence and M.

Roche, respecting this MAGNIFICENT concern, as they always called it—was it *possible* that Victor might have seen cause to suspect that it was not so prosperous as it had been represented to be? If this were so, it would at once account for the change from gay to grave, in the demeanour of their new partner.

Nor did she forget the fact, that, in the case of Victor, such a failure of their sanguine confidence in the prosperity of the concern would bring with it to her the deep additional mortification of having connived (in direct opposition to all the wishes of Lady Amelia) at, and assisted him in placing money in it.

When these ideas first obtruded themselves, poor Clara certainly felt very deplorably unhappy, and the more so, because she began to doubt if her conduct in keeping Lady Amelia in ignorance of the means by which the young man had been admitted as a partner in the concern, were altogether correct and justifiable.

But having brooded over this very disagreeable doubt—rather longer than was agreeable—she permitted herself to be consoled by the

idea that this overgrown fortune of hers, which had never been the object of any very cordial liking to her since the fearful discovery that it had been the means of separating her from the man whose happiness she had hoped to ensure by its possession, might, after all, be the means, perhaps, of repairing whatever might be now going wrong in the prospects of Victor

She at length, very magnanimously, determined that the over-wrought delicacy of Lady Amlia should no longer stand in the way of her making Annie and her husband effectually independent and happy.

As to the ten thousand pounds for which she had given Monsieur Roche her signature, she felt, whatever her dear friend Lady Amelia might do, that it was, in truth, of no consequence at all

The only real difficulty that lay before her, arose from her anticipation of the very genuine averseness of her noble friend to her doing what she chose with her own money. But Clara remembered, with great satisfaction, that she could not be again reproached for

wishing to "buy" a husband for her friend; a phrase which certainly had produced a great effect at the time it was used, and had gone further towards preventing such an arrangement in favour of Victor as would have brought him immediate independence, than any other it would have been well possible to find

But now Clara was very firmly resolved to let no word of any kind interfere with her resolute purpose of placing Annie and her child beyond the reach of any and all commercial disasters whatever, and having thus resolved, she quietly determined not to urge Victor to any premature disclosure of the cause of his pale face and languid eyes, but to keep herself in readiness to set every thing to rights, as soon as she was permitted to understand what was wrong.

CHAPTER IV

During this interval, which, notwithstanding her private conviction of her own power of being useful, was not altogether without anxiety, she received the following letter from her old schoolmaster

"My Dearly-beloved Clara,—

"I have often thought that our correspondence, though so perfectly equal in punctüality, was very lamentably unequal in everything else, for your pages are always filled with interesting details, and mine, though having plenty of words, with no matter at all

"But now, I think, I am in a condition to redeem my credit as an interesting correspondent, for I really have a great deal of important news to tell you.

"Your kind breast, my beloved Clara, has been brought to feel a good deal of interest for my excellent Mary, although your personal knowledge of her has been very little, and I think you will, therefore, be pleased to hear that she is about to be married in a manner most perfectly satisfactory to me.

"My nephew, that is to be, is of my own profession, I do not mean that he is a schoolmaster, Clara, even to one insignificant young lady, but he is a clergyman.

"I have for some time past suspected that he thought my gentle unobtrusive Mary rather an agreeable companion, but when these suspicions were first awakened, he was only a curate; and as Mary's fortune, even when your old schoolmaster is defunct, will not go far towards supporting a family, I was glad to observe that the *liking* I suspected was kept within prudent bounds on the part of the

gentleman, and apparently not perceived at all on the part of the lady.

"The parish of which this Mr. Craddock is, or rather was, the curate, is at the distance of three miles from us; and though we have seen him very often here (for he is young and a good walker, not to mention his being in love), I have but rarely visited him, and more rarely still, had any personal intercourse with his neighbours. One of them is the *patron* of the living, and has become so much attached to our young friend the curate, during his two years' residence in the parsonage-house, that on the death of the rector, who had been sent to Nice, in the hope of curing the malady of which he died, he presented him to the living.

"This very unexpected piece of preferment has converted what seemed like a very hopeless attachment into a very hopeful one, and, to make a long story short, the parsonage-house is rapidly undergoing a few necessary repairs, and when all this is completed, my Mary will become Mrs. Craddock.

"Nor is this the only change in our quiet

neighbourhood. Another of our reverend neighbours has died, and his living has been given to a gentleman that both you and I, my dear Clara, know already by name, and I am well pleased, I assure you, to know him personally, for he is evidently a man of great ability, a reader, a thinker, and, moreover, a very agreeable companion

"His living is still nearer to me than that of Craddock, and I shall be disappointed if I do not see a good deal of him.

"'And what is his name?' you will say, and may probably add, 'Where, and when, did *we* ever hear of him before?' The last two years of your life, my dearest Clara, have enabled you, as I flatter myself, so nearly to forget the disagreeable recollections connected with the preceding one, as not to wince now at reading the ungracious name of Henry Hamilton.

"The clergyman who has recently become my neighbour, is the Mr. Clarkson of whom I think you have often heard Mr. Hamilton speak, as his college tutor and friend. I

honestly confess, that before I became personally acquainted with this gentleman, I had so strong a prejudice at work within me against the Honourable Octavius, and everything connected with him, that the moment I heard the name of my new neighbour, I determined, as much as possible, to keep clear of him.

"But this *much as possible* avoidance has not sufficed to prevent my discovering, that in addition to much varied and profound learning, he is blessed by Heaven with an intellect of the highest order—deep-thinking, unprejudiced, and with as strong a love of right, and hatred of wrong, as it is well possible to conceive

"His having had the ill-luck of becoming tutor to a dishonourable young Honourable, could not long outweigh the intrinsic value of such a man, and as to the friendship which we were led to understand existed between them, my memory as well as my charity pleaded for him; for I could not forget, that there were others, besides Mr. Clarkson, who had thought him not unworthy of regard.

"Here is my case, Clara, and I do not greatly fear that you will give judgment against me; although I will confess to you, that I occasionally feel a very silly sort of wish, that this admirable Clarkson had not been the particular friend of the Honourable Henry Octavius Hamilton.

"I feel almost certain, though I do not know why, that my name is not unknown to him. Not that he has ever alluded, in my presence, to the existence of such an individual as his former pupil; and, perhaps, it may be this avoidance which has suggested to me the notion of his not treating me, even at our first meeting, like a perfect stranger.

"Has old England lost all attraction, and all interest for you, dearest Clara? Before the marriage of your dear Annie, I used occasionally to dream dreams of your coming some day to pay me a visit; but you now speak of her and her child, as well as of her mother, with a degree of family interest in their concerns, which suggests the fear that it would be impossible for you to leave them.

I do not quite like the idea, dear pupil, of your forgetting that you are Englishwoman.

"You know that I have no anti-gallican prejudices; but, on the contrary, that I value their literature, and admire, in no little degree, the talent which has produced it. Yet, nevertheless, I should not be well pleased to see my pupil converted into a *bonâ-fide* Frenchwoman.

"They are, I believe, very admirable, and very charming, in their way; but, as far as I am able to judge, I like the English way better.

"You must not quarrel with me for this, and consider it as a prejudice. No, my dear Clara, it is an instinct, and not a prejudice, and the feeling is as true to nature, and, therefore, as true to reason as the instinct which leads some fish to prefer one coast, and some another; and that, without either of them deserving to be called odd fish, nevertheless

"So, for love of your old schoolmaster, my Clara, adhere to some, at least, of your insular instincts, and prove that you do so, some fine

day or other, by crossing the channel, and coming to look at us.

"My Mary is not so overpowered with her happiness as to forget the friends whose kindness cheered her when her future prospects were not so smiling as they seem to be now.

"She commissioned me to say to you, (when I told her I was going to write to you, to announce our news,) that, let her future life be what it may, she shall never forget the kindness by which you have so repeatedly thrown sunshine upon the days that are past.

"Poor dear Mary! I am afraid I shall miss her very much! She is such a kind, loving little soul, that her leaving my nest will be like taking away a soft cotton lining from it.

"Tell me that some day or other it is possible that you may come and look at me, my dearest Clara, in the really delightful home that your bounty has bestowed upon me; and I think that the bare idea of such a visit would seem to people my parsonage at once.

"God bless you, my dear pupil, and believe in the unalterable affection of

"Your loving

"SCHOOLMASTER."

"P.S.—Mary will be married before I get your reply to this."

* * * * *

This letter did Clara good, for it came to her at a moment when anything which could suggest the idea of a future, distant both as to *time* and *place* from the scene where she was suffering from such deep and dark anxiety, was a relief to her.

For many days—nay, for nearly three weeks, the despondency of Victor continued to be unmistakeably perceptible to Clara, although his wife and Lady Amelia still appeared to notice it only as the result of a violent cold.

Annie, indeed, protested, with all the authoritative confidence of medical science, that she knew precisely the sort of malady from

which he was suffering, for she well remembered the particularly cold day when he had taken the chill, and the various specific acts of imprudence by which he had incurred the malady.

But the real solution of this conjugal blundering, on her part, might be found in the still swollen gums of her baby idol.

And never was sympathy more perfect than that which existed between herself and her mother, in this baby worship. It was not that Victor had lost his place in the heart of either; he was as much the fondly-loved husband of his unobservant Annie now, as he had been during the moon of honey; nor had Lady Amelia ever for a moment ceased to love and value him as a very dear and precious son; but, as to their either of them having time to think of Victor's cold, while baby was cutting her double teeth, it was quite out of the question.

Clara saw all this, and was thankful for it. That she was right, and they were wrong, in the interpretation put upon his heavy eyes, pale face, and loss of appetite, she could not

indulge herself with the comfort of doubting for a single moment; but, nevertheless, she flattered herself that it was a great deal more than possible that the cause of the anxiety which she so distinctly read in his features, might not be incurable, nor even lasting.

The novelty of his position, and the much graver responsibility that was now upon him, might be quite sufficient, she thought, to account for his looking over-fatigued and anxious, without coming to the conclusion that the extensive concern, whose unvarying prosperity she had heard vaunted so incessantly during the last two years, was about to become bankrupt

She dwelt on this view of the case with such steady confidence, and so much appearance of reason, that it is probable her mind would soon have recovered its usual even cheerfulness, had she been fortunate enough to have had any confidential friend near her, with whom she could have conversed on this harassing subject, without reserve, discussing both her hopes and her fears freely, and with the chance, perhaps, of obtaining information

which might have justified either the one or the other, and thereby given more occupation to her judgment, and less to her imagination.

But, unfortunately, Sir William Lawrence, who was the only individual with whom she could have conversed, without reserve, on the subject, was not in Paris, he having joined an old friend from whom he had been long separated, in an excursion of a few weeks to Vienna.

During a considerable portion of this painful time, Clara sustained her spirits by the consolatory reflection that, let what would happen to Monsieur Roche's magnificent mining concern, and however abortive Victor's splendid hopes of realizing a noble fortune by it might finally prove, her own wealth would effectually prevent any real pecuniary distress from reaching those she loved.

It rarely happens, that a person so isolated as Clara, without any relation that she knew of, save her aunt, should suffer so severely in mind as she was now doing, from anxiety

concerning the pecuniary concerns of other people

Had Lady Amelia Wharton, to whom, and with reason, she was as much attached as any relationship could have made her—had Lady Amelia Wharton been somewhat less sensitive on the subject of pecuniary obligation, the situation of poor Clara would assuredly have been greatly less painful. But the antecedents of both these really and equally high-minded women had rendered them more than usually delicate ; or, more properly speaking, *timid*, on the delicate subject.

The foregoing pages will have shown that my unfortunate heroine had been early taught to feel that degradation, and not affection, was the feeling likely to be generated by the idea of receiving wealth from the hands of a stranger, and her peculiarly intimate intercourse with Lady Amelia had much more tended to strengthen this idea, than to lessen it.

Whilst unfortunately, on the other side, many a painful passage in the early life of her ladyship had taught her to feel that the grasp

of a friendly hand, without money in it, was a greatly more agreeable caress than any that could be given, when contaminated by a donation.

The thoughts which were generated by such experience, had little that was very soothing in them for poor Clara; nevertheless, it was the consciousness that those she loved, and who, in fact, constituted the only family to which she could feel that she belonged, were not within risk of any peril that poverty could bring, which was her best support during this painful interval.

CHAPTER V.

THERE are some annoyances to which reasonable people can teach themselves to become so accustomed, that they learn to endure them without wincing; but, in all such cases, I believe the annoyance must be of a nature to be distinctly seen, looked at, and understood.

Doubt and uncertainty, though they may sometimes have the flickering light of hope to cheer them, are far more destructive to *tranquillity* than heavier sorrows, which are looked at, seen, and known, *distinctly*.

And, therefore, it was, in all probability, that Clara, notwithstanding the comfortable

consciousness of her consolatory tens of thousands, still felt herself too much worried and annoyed by the altered aspect and manner of Victor, to endure patiently its longer continuance.

It was while this state of mind was growing rapidly upon her, that Lady Amelia received a letter from the absent Sir William, announcing his intention of prolonging his absence from Paris till the end of the following month.

"It is the last ounce which breaks the horse's back," says the proverb. This prolonged absence of Sir William Lawrence acted as this last ounce upon Clara.

She had, in truth, before she left her bed on the morning this letter arrived, decided upon letting things take their course till his return to Paris, and then to state to him openly her fears, that the concern in which Victor was engaged was not going on well; as no other course, which she could suggest, could suffice to account for his altered manner and appearance.

Moreover, she was determined likewise to inform Sir William, without reserve, that

having no relations or ties of any kind to interfere with her perfect independence, she had determined to use her influence with Victor, to persuade him *at once* to give up his interest in the concern, and to consent to her adopting his child as her heir.

When this should have been done with all the formality that law could give it, her hope was that they should still remain together as one family, in whatever part of the world Lady Amelia and Annie should prefer.

Having once arranged this scheme in her head, every hour spent in meditation upon it made it appear in every way more feasible and more delightful; and great, indeed, was her vexation and disappointment on learning the prolonged absence of the only individual to whom she could look for assistance in bringing it into action.

Nor was it merely her eagerness to have a scheme which promised so much happiness at once put in progress, which caused this deep vexation, for she either saw or fancied that Lady Amelia too was beginning to look at Victor with an anxious eye.

"The double teeth" were not discussed upon, she thought, with quite so much eagerness by her ladyship, although the young mother had not yet arrived at the possibility of thinking of anything else; and Clara feared, and certainly not without just cause, that if Victor became the object of only a little of the watchful attention which had hitherto been devoted to the baby, the notion of his having a *bad cold* would not long appear sufficient to account to Lady Amelia for the change which was so visible in his manner, as well as his appearance.

But Lady Amelia was not the confidant which Clara desired to have on this occasion.

Moreover, she felt too much affectionate sympathy and anxiety for poor Victor himself, to wish that he should be constrained to make the painful disclosure she anticipated to any one but herself; for she well knew that no one else would be able to apply such a panacea as her wealth offered, for all the evils with which a failing enterprise could threaten him.

One suggestion had occurred to her, on first

hearing of the prolonged absence of Sir William Lawrence, which at the moment made her almost rejoice that he was absent. "I will write a friendly note to Monsieur Roche," thought Clara, "begging him to favour me with another *tête-à-tête* visit; and half-an-hour's confidential talk with him, will put me more *au fait* of the real state of affairs than all the information which it can be in the power of Sir William Lawrence to give me."

The friendly note was accordingly written with all promptitude; but it was returned to her with the information that "Monsieur Roche was not in Paris."

Her state of uncertainty, however, as to what she had better do, in order to relieve her anxiety respecting Victor, did not last long, for Lady Amelia abandoned the nursery shortly after breakfast on the day after her unsuccessful invitation to M. Roche, and penetrating to her retreat in the little drawing-room, asked "if she might be admitted for half-an-hour?"

The answer was given by Clara's taking both her hands, and placing her on the sofa.

"What a pattern grandmamma you are!" said Clara, laughing. "How long is it since you wasted a morning hour on me?"

"Annie is so very young you know!" replied Lady Amelia; "and I don't feel quite certain," she added, "that the nurse knows as much about the double teeth as she ought to do. Convulsions, you know, my dear Clara, *may* come on in a moment! I do assure you that the very greatest attention is necessary."

"I should never have given you credit for being such an excellent nurse!" said Clara. "Did you not feel it come upon you like a sort of inspiration?"

"Yes! I think I did," returned her ladyship, in the same playful tone

"But, dearest Clara!" she added more gravely, "I begin to think that I have permitted myself to be more completely absorbed by my nursery cares and joys than I ought to be. Do you remember asking me some days ago whether I did not think Victor was looking ill?"

"Yes, I remember it perfectly," replied Clara, gravely.

"And I told you, in reply," resumed Lady Amelia, "that I thought he was only suffering from a bad cold. But I begin to fear, my dearest Clara, that there are symptoms of a worse malady than that."

Poor Clara had been wishing for something like this; for though she had not courage enough to be the first to point out the misery that must infallibly fall upon them, were Victor Dormont to be either seriously ill or seriously sad, she had, for many days past, been longing for the comfort of being told that she was alarming herself too easily.

Yet now that the subject was alluded to, she shrunk from it, and replied, with the best smile she could muster, "A bad cold, you know, is often said to be worse than a fever, so do not let us persuade ourselves that our poor, dear Victor is attacked by something worse than a cold."

But the smile, such as it was, was not greeted by any attempt to return it. After the ominous pause of a moment or two, Lady Amelia replied, fixing her eyes with very melancholy meaning on those of her friend—

"I would give a great deal to believe that you did not understand me, Clara! But I cannot believe it. It was from the expression of your countenance yesterday, when you shook hands with him, when we were parting for the night, that I first received the impression which now torments me. Victor Dormont looks *unhappy*, Clara, and I am quite sure that you think so too."

"I do, Lady Amelia," replied Clara, in a tone which no longer sought to falsify or conceal her feelings. "I do think so And then comes the nervous, the terrible question, whence can this uneasiness arise? and who shall answer it, my dear friend?"

"It can only be *himself*, Clara, for, in the absence of my uncle, I know of no one in the least likely to be in his confidence," replied Lady Amelia

"And even if I did," she added, "I should be unwilling to take advantage of it, for the purpose of learning from another anything concerning Victor, which he would wish to conceal from me himself."

"I can fully appreciate your delicacy in

this," replied Clara, mournfully, shaking her head; "and yet I should scarcely think it right to adopt this system of delicate reserve in the present case, because I feel so very sure that no secret of importance to any of us would be kept from *you*, were not the knowledge of it likely to inflict more pain than he could bear to bring upon you."

"And you think that it would be right for me to know this terrible secret, let the information reach me either directly or indirectly?" returned Lady Amelia, looking frightened.

"A moment's reflection will certainly make you think so too, my dear friend," replied Clara. "If we are mistaken as to the existence of such a secret, no evil can possibly arise from our becoming aware of the mistake, nor could Victor himself feel anything but love and gratitude towards us for the affectionate anxiety which led to it. But if it unfortunately prove to be the fact, that he has some sorrow or anxiety weighing upon his spirits which he conceals, in the hope of sparing us pain, the good we might do him would be great indeed. Depend upon it, Lady Amelia,

that it is anxiety for Annie which leads him to be thus reserved; and our sympathy, and our advice also, might bring comfort to him, without his dear young wife being troubled by hearing anything about it."

"You are right, Clara!" returned her friend, earnestly. "I think you are always right, and, with that opinion, the wisest thing I can do will be to leave the matter entirely to your judgment. If you think it would be best for us to ask him, *explicitly*, if any circumstance has occurred to make him feel anxious and uneasy, I will give my full consent to its being done. Nay, to prove my confidence in the wisdom of your advice, my dear Clara, I will volunteer the disagreeable task of being the spokeswoman. But then you must tell me, dearest, what I ought to say I must take care not to let my harangue have the air of a maternal lecture. Poor, dear Victor! I have been so long used to his gay smiles, and his laughter-loving way of treating everything as a jest, that I must be careful not to begin by alarming him, or I am quite sure that he will either run off under pretence of visiting the

nursery, or turn the whole matter into a jest, and laugh at me for not letting a man have a head-ache without fancying that he is going to be a bankrupt!"

"Then let me speak to him, my dear friend," replied Clara, gravely. "I do not think that when he sees how greatly I am in earnest, he will feel disposed to jest with me."

And it was then finally settled between them, that as soon as dinner was over, Lady Amelia and Annie should make it appear absolutely necessary that they should go for a few moments to the nursery, before the coffee appeared in the drawing-room, and that, being there, Lady Amelia should contrive—no very difficult matter—to remain there long enough to give Clara an opportunity of conversing with Victor in the confidential manner which had, till of late, been so usual between them, but which had now, as if by accident, ceased altogether.

CHAPTER VI.

LADY AMELIA found no great difficulty in making her daughter understand, that it would be quite as well that they should see with their own eyes whether the baby really did take her principal afternoon meal with her usual appetite, "for it was worse than folly to trust altogether to servants;" and thereupon Clara and Victor found themselves *tête-à-tête* in the drawing-room, with their respective coffee-cups still in their hands.

Victor politely watched for the moment when Clara was ready to dismiss hers, and he approached and took it from her; but having done so he did not reseat himself, but looked,

as she thought, very much as if he contemplated making a speedy exit through the door.

But poor Clara, though her heart beat very painfully, was quite determined that he should not escape; and she therefore said, very distinctly, the moment he had deposited her cup upon the table, "Let me speak to you for five minutes, will you, dear Victor?" and as she said this, she so placed herself in one corner of the sofa she occupied, as to indicate her wish that he should place himself in the other. A sudden and strongly-marked change of complexion showed her plainly enough that her companion did not hear this request with indifference.

Victor had been looking very pale while at table, but his complexion took a tint so strikingly the contrary, that she could not witness it without an emotion so painful as to render the idea of the conversation which was to follow extremely embarrassing to her, and had she been herself the only person interested in the conversation which she had asked for, she would certainly have, even then, contrived some way to escape from it, rather than compel him

to undergo what was so evidently painful to him.

But, as it was, she dared not venture to spare either herself or him, and therefore, before he had accepted the place she offered him, but stood positively trembling before her on the hearth-rug, she said, "It is painful, my dear Victor to ask from a friend for a greater degree of confidence than he seems inclined to bestow; and I might not have courage to do so now, were it not that Lady Amelia is as anxious as I am to know what it is which is so evidently preying upon your spirits, and destroying your health. Believe me, dear Victor, that be it what it may, you will endure it better if you will permit your friends to share it with you"

"It may be better for me, but what will it be for them?" exclaimed the miserable young man, raising his clenched hands to his forehead. "You may guess what my condition must be, Miss Holmwood," he continued, looking wildly at her, "when I tell you that I would cut off my right hand, could I, by so doing, cease to be a husband and a father!"

"These are dreadful words, Victor," she

replied, gently and soothingly; "and trust me, they are the result of the painful concealment you have so unwisely preserved. You will cease to lament having a wife, my dear friend, when you have roused your courage to the painful task of confiding to her the cause of your unhappiness. Do you think Annie will love you the less, my dear Victor, because some pecuniary disaster threatens you?"

"And how dare I wish that she should continue to love me, when her doing so can only tend to increase her misery? Had she not better hate me, than continue to love a man who has brought misery and degradation upon every one dear to her?"

"If you do but exaggerate the cause of your uneasiness one half as much as you do the effect which any pecuniary disappointment is likely to produce on Annie, you will only have to examine it a little more reasonably in order to recover your own tranquillity. I have for some time past perceived that you were uneasy and anxious about something or other, my dear Victor," she continued, laying her friendly hand

upon his arm; "and knowing from experience, that the best remedy under such circumstances, or, at least, the best consolation, is to be found from the sympathy, and, perhaps, the counsel of friends, I determined to take courage, and ask you frankly to explain to me the cause of your very evident anxiety"

"Is it very evident?" replied the unhappy young man, raising his hands to his face as if to hide the index which had betrayed him. "I have done my best—I have striven hard, Miss Holmwood, to conceal what I have been suffering; for every added day that I can spare Annie from the misery I myself endure is a blessing—a positive blessing, and a positive good!"

"It is so, Victor, if looked at on one side only," replied Clara, gravely; "but the certainty of the advantage gained by this system may be doubted, if we fairly and rationally examine it on all sides. If commercial affairs are going wrong with you, dear Victor, the concealment cannot last long; and when it ceases, it will not be only her confidence in

your prosperity which will be shaken, but her confidence in *you* will cease to be so perfectly undoubting as it has been."

"Then tell her everything!" cried the unhappy young man, starting up in the most vehement agitation. "I would rather she should know me to be a dishonoured beggar, than see her look as if she had lost her confidence in me!"

"Anything, and everything, is better than delusion, Victor," replied Clara, earnestly, "but do not torment yourself," she continued, kindly, "by fancying that the idea of poverty will come accompanied in the estimation of any of us, with that of dishonour on your part. We all know you too well, dear Victor, to render that possible. If the concern in which you are engaged has failed, or is likely to do so, you have the comfort of knowing, that the position of Lady Amelia is not affected by it; and moreover," she added, after the pause of a moment, "you have the additional satisfaction of knowing, that your own firmness in refusing (even under great temptation) to let your wife's fortune remain in your own hands, will have

prevented her from ever feeling the evils arising from positive poverty."

"God bless you, my dear, generous friend!" exclaimed the young man, with great emotion; "the remembrance of *this* is, indeed, a comfort to me! I often feel that it is the one only safety-raft which will save us from sinking!"

"Perhaps not the only one, Victor," she replied, cheerfully. "However," she added, "it is very probable, I think, that there may be no necessity for our taking to our *rafts* at all. Tell Lady Amelia all you know yourself respecting the dangers which you think appear to threaten the concern in which you are engaged, and let us take her opinion upon the question of concealing, or not concealing the facts from your wife. Her judgment is excellent; and moreover, she knows Annie better than ever you do, and be very sure, dear Victor, that when you have taken her ladyship fully into your confidence, you will not again feel so miserable as you have lately done."

"I will obey you most gratefully, my dear, generous benefactress!" replied Victor, fervently kissing her hand; "and the immense

relief I already feel, from what has passed between us now, teaches me to hope, that I may again know the blessing of looking at my wife and child, without wishing that my eyes were closed for ever!"

Clara looked at him with something very like an expression of severity on her speaking features. He was instantly aware of it, and coloured violently, and for a moment remained as silent as she was herself

"You think me very weak, Miss Holmwood," he said at length "I believe I am so—I trust I am so. And when the feelings are strong, and the judgment not so, everything like *doubt* becomes a torture! There is no chance, is there," he added, after another interval of silence, "that Sir William Lawrence will soon return to Paris?"

"I think not," replied Clara. "But now, Victor," she added, cheerfully, "I no longer feel so much impatience about his return. As long as you seemed to shrink from all confidential communion with us, I looked forward to his coming as the only chance we had of recovering the happiness we seemed to have

lost. But I don't feel that we want him so much now, dear Victor."

The young man again changed colour as she said this; and Clara, fancying that her words had appeared to him to contain a reproach, hastened to change the subject by saying, "It is a long time since your lively friend, M Roche, called here. Has he left Paris as well as Sir William?"

Poor Victor's face seemed to be a book, where it was easy to read strange matters, though not equally so to understand them. No sooner had Clara pronounced the name of *Roche*, than Victor's features betrayed very strong emotion. He did not immediately reply to her question, and when he did, it was not by answering it

"The absence of Monsieur Roche at this time," he said, "is indeed most peculiarly unfortunate, for it leaves me in darkness upon the only point on which I am deeply anxious to obtain light Everything else is as nothing."

"But is there no other person, dear Victor, connected with this very large concern,

and such we have always considered it to be," said Clara—"is there no one but Monsieur Roche himself, who would be able to give you information respecting the danger which seems to threaten it?"

He looked at her very earnestly for a moment without saying a syllable in reply to her very rational question, and then said, starting from his seat, and walking hastily towards the window, "No!"

She now felt that she had fulfilled her promise to Lady Amelia as satisfactorily as it was in her power to do it She had, at least, obtained what she herself felt to be a great advantage, and which she believed her friend would value more highly still; for she had so far softened the hard reserve in which the unhappy young man had enveloped himself, as to make him not only speak openly of his situation, but to make him both feel and confess that he had found great comfort in doing so

But this had not been achieved without very painful emotions on her own part, and in short she so much wished to be alone, that

she said rather abruptly, "Shall I send Lady Amelia to you now? I am going to my room, and must think all this over, dear Victor Depend upon it we shall contrive amongst us, somehow or other, to get over the difficulties which now seem to threaten you. There may be other modes by which a party of friends who really love each other, may go on loving and loved very happily together, even if these boasted mines should turn out a positive humbug. . . . But what has become of your friend Roche all this time? He must surely have it in his power to tell us how matters really stand, if any one can . Where is he, Victor?"

As Clara pronounced these last words, she raised her eyes to the face of her companion, and severe indeed was the shock she received from doing so. He had been looking pale and ill before, but at that moment his countenance was perfectly ghastly.

She started up in great alarm, for she thought he was about to faint; and so truly does "use lessen marvel," that the sight of one fainting man produces more alarm than

that of half-a-dozen of the weaker sex in the same condition.

"You are ill, dear Victor!" she exclaimed, approaching the bell, with the intention of ringing it; but he seized her hand and prevented her doing it.

"No, no!" he said, in a whisper, that was almost inaudible, "my illness will not be lessened by the entrance of servants."

Poor Clara felt only too certain that this was true, and she felt too, that had she the courage to ask him one question, whether he answered her in words or not, she should be able to guess pretty accurately whether the ruin he evidently anticipated was such as to affect only his individual interest in the concern into which she had procured him admission, or whether she was herself involved in it, as the consequence of having signed her name to the paper brought to her by Monsieur Roche, for the ostensible purpose of giving a guarantee for vesting ten thousand pounds in the name of Victor Dormont!

She had, as she thought, understood the nature of the service required by M. Roche

for this purpose too well for any reasonable idea to enter her head that her signature might, by possibility, involve more of her property than the stipulated ten thousand pounds; but the evident suffering of Victor, so much greater than she thought him likely to feel, if nothing worse threatened him than the failure of the colossal enterprise which she had often heard him say was well calculated to make or mar the fortunes of many, frightened her.

In talking of this chance, as it concerned himself, he was wont, through the first happy year and a half of his married life, to declare that both Annie and himself were a great deal too happy to wish for great wealth. The getting rid of the obnoxious title of "*commiss*" had evidently been a great relief to him, —more, as it appeared to be, because it was considered as so degrading by Lady Amelia and Sir William, than from any feelings of his own on the subject.

But from the time when it was finally settled that her magnificent wedding gift to Annie should be irrevocably settled upon her

and her children, he had uniformly declared that he was already quite as rich as he wanted to be.

"I can always command a good salary," he was wont to say, "and with my Annie's fortune, we might be as happy as the day is long, even without that."

That he was in earnest in saying this, nobody who knew him as well as Clara did could doubt for a moment, and not only did she believe, but she perfectly agreed with him.

Her own vast fortune had been the cause of so little happiness to her, and the affection of those who loved her had been the cause of so much, that she never could persuade herself to bring the two blessings into competition with each other.

It was because she knew, and felt all this, that the vehement emotion which Victor Dormont now betrayed, so fearfully alarmed her

She felt deeply and painfully persuaded, that she did *not yet* comprehend the cause of his suffering That his lips should tremble,

and become as pale as ashes, because he was no longer likely to realize a large fortune by mining, she knew and she felt to be impossible.

The one question, therefore, which she longed to ask, but dared not, was, whether he knew the nature of the agreement which she had herself entered into with M. Roche.

She had thought, during the hasty interview with that gentleman, which terminated by her becoming guarantee for Victor Dormont *to the amount of ten thousand pounds, as his share of the capital in the mining company, of which he had hitherto been a clerk,*— she had thought during this interview that she had perfectly understood the nature of the transaction, and as this sum (in the shape of a donation) was precisely what she had wished to bestow upon the young pair, when the settlement of her previous gift upon Annie had rendered it of no effect in obtaining Victor's admission to the dignity of a partnership in the concern, her satisfaction at so easily settling all difficulties, without wounding the feelings of Lady Amelia, was very great.

Never before, perhaps, had Clara experienced the pleasure which ought reasonably to belong to the consciousness of independent wealth; but when M. Roche left her after this somewhat hurried interview, she certainly did feel that however little her great fortune had hitherto tended to promote her happiness, it did bestow a power of benefitting those she loved, which ought to be considered as a great blessing.

It probably was this very pleasant feeling of satisfaction, which had hitherto prevented her ever meditating upon the transaction as a matter of business. All the happy results she had anticipated from it followed immediately; and it had never entered her head to recal the form of words in which she had agreed to assist him to the amount required.

Neither would it have thrown the least light upon the question which had now suggested itself to her, if she could have done so, for that question was of considerably more importance than any connected with the

modest sum of ten thousand pounds could have been.

There had been a strangely wild and miserable expression in the glance of Victor's eye when the name of M. Roche was mentioned, which first puzzled, and then decidedly alarmed her. But it was totally in vain that she taxed her memory upon the subject

Victor left her, confessing that his head ached violently, and that he wished to lie down, and she also retired to her bed-room, to meditate on all she had said to Monsieur Roche, and all that Monsieur Roche had said to her, but without being able to recal a single word, save and except that she had explicitly agreed to his request, that she would guarantee by her signature Victor Dormont's contingent of ten thousand pounds to the capital of the mining company in which he had hitherto been a clerk.

The words which passed between them, on this occasion, she really did remember, *faithfully* and *distinctly*, and she was conscious

she did so, and that no lurking blunder, or error of any kind, could have been involved in them.

But while meditating with a very comfortable degree of confidence on this fact, the recollection of Victor's look of misery again recurred to her, and by some strange association, utterly impossible to trace, the fact of her having *written* her name, as well as that of having *promised* to be security for the sum required, occurred to her

Did this recollection generate anything like a feeling of suspicion in her mind? It would be scarcely just to say it did so; and yet it must have been some feeling approaching to it, which suggested the mental questions, "How did I write it? Where did I write it? On what paper? At what table?"

And then came a whole host of positively *blushing* negatives. "The friend of Sir William Lawrence! The accomplished amateur, whose only wish for wealth has been demonstrated by his liberal patronage of art! Oh, monstrous! I hope I shall never see him again;

for I should be ashamed to look at him! But, thank Heaven! neither Sir William, nor any one else, will ever know that so detestable a thought, so vile a suspicion, ever crossed my brain!"

And then she crossed her arms upon the table, and laid her head upon them, as if to hide herself, and her unworthy thoughts, from the light of day.

But not all her repentance, not all her efforts to drive this detestable idea from her mind, could avail to make her forget it. Again and again, and despite her utmost efforts to prevent it, her thoughts recurred to the scene when, with so gay a heart, and so heedless a hand, she had written her name upon a sheet of folded paper, below a few written lines which he read to her rapidly, the only sentence which she remembered being that which stated the purpose for which this security was given.

But the idea which rested upon her mind, far more distinctly than anything else which had passed, was the gay good-humour and high spirits of M. Roche.

She remembered that at one moment, when beginning to read the document gravely, and with a very business-like air, he had suddenly stopped short, waved the paper gaily above his head, and exclaimed, "Can't you figure him to yourself, Miss Holmwood? Can't you fancy Victor's ecstacy when he sees this, and reads it to his Annie? . . . . But let us finish!" he added, "it is a sin to pause in such a work as this, even to dwell upon the happiness it will cause!"

She well remembered all this, and remembered too, the happy eagerness with which she hastened to sign her name.

Could this have been all acting on his part? *Could* she at that moment have been signing she knew not what? And could that unknown something have involved herself in any undreamed-of responsibility?"

The idea was really a very dreadful one, and for a moment it certainly made her tremble; but there was a good deal of high-minded feeling in the impulse which suddenly made her change her attitude, which for a few

moments had been expressive of very painful despondency, to one of active employment, and recovered energy.

"And if it be so," thus ran her soliloquy—"if instead of being a marvellous phenomenon of female wealth, I have become an instructive spectacle of female unfitness for the possession of it, will that be any good reason for being unhappy? If this vague suspicion which has so strangely and so strongly taken possession of me, should really prove well founded, may I not be quite as happy as ever I was in my life, in spite of it? Annie has got her ten thousand pounds, safe and sound, in spite of M. Roche and his mines; and I will be little Clara's governess, and aunt Sarah, who as yet, I believe, has never formed any intimate friendship with M. Roche, shall help us, and" . . .

And here her reverie ceased to form itself into words; but she thought and thought with increasing earnestness, perhaps, but certainly with decreasing melancholy, till at the end of about an hour of solitary musing,

Clara Holmwood felt herself conscious of a higher species, and a higher degree of independence, than she had ever rejoiced in before.

CHAPTER VII.

As far, therefore, as the feelings, nay, and the position also, of my real heroine is concerned, I might close my narrative here, for she had really arrived at a degree of peaceful, nay, cheerful contentment, which might well be considered as a very happy conclusion to her not very happy history. She had recovered, and very triumphantly recovered, from a disappointment as bitter as it was well possible for a high-minded woman to endure; and, notwithstanding her plebeian origin, my heroine was very decidedly of that class.

If her suspicions respecting the cause of

poor Victor's misery were well founded; if she had, indeed, by the careless thoughtlessness of a moment, really lost, or endangered, the vast fortune her father had bequeathed her, she had not done so till, by a most happy chain of accidents, she had bestowed as much upon those she loved, as they would consent to accept from her

Her well-beloved schoolmaster was considerably richer than he had ever wished to be; her beloved Annie was placed beyond the reach of any mining disasters, and this was equivalent to her mother's being beyond the reach of any very painful pecuniary anxieties for the future

Aunt Sarah was not only very snugly provided for during her life, but when the five hundred per annum, bequeathed by the worthy corn-factor, was settled upon her, Clara had taken care that the reversion of it should be settled upon her likewise, for she knew the loving quality of the old lady's heart too well, not to feel that this arrangement was laying up a pleasure in store for her, and if, in sober earnest, it should come

to pass that this little delicate attention to aunt Sarah's peculiarities proved the means of saving her niece from absolute beggary, it would certainly make a very pretty episode in her history.

In sober earnest, however, absurd as such speculations may appear to be, they did in truth so far occupy the mind of Clara, that she did not emerge from her bedroom till she had fully made up her mind to feel, that if that splendid patron of the fine arts, Monsieur Roche, had really robbed her of her magnificent fortune, while she was occupied by watching his Gallic and graceful *gambades*, she should very probably be the happier for it.

Whether she would so easily have come to the same conclusion if the Honourable Henry Octavius Hamilton had never displayed so vehement an aversion to accepting it, may be doubtful.

No sooner, however, had she arrived at this philosophical and very satisfactory conclusion, namely, that she did not care whether she had been robbed or not, than her thoughts

took another direction, and she again felt blushing at the very child-like indifference with which she had been meditating upon a possible contingency, which so deeply involved the interest of those she loved, not one of whom could be expected to treat it as lightly as she did herself.

"My dear schoolmaster," thought she, "would not call this wisdom, but romance; and of course, as usual, he would be perfectly right."

And then came the very effectually sobering recollection, that Lady Amelia must be anxiously expecting to hear the result of her interview with Victor; and the recollection of this did, in truth, suffice to sober her more effectually than any of the doubts which had occurred to her respecting the honour of Monsieur Roche.

There was, however, no mixture of imagination, either of good or of evil, in her recollections of poor Victor's looks or words. That nothing approaching to an explanation of his evident misery, was to be gathered from what had passed between them, only

increased the painful embarrassment she felt in seeking her friend. She was quite aware that the very slightest hint of the suspicion which had led to her weaving so agreeable a romance for herself, would appear to Lady Amelia as pretty nearly the heaviest misfortune that could fall upon them, for Clara, with all her romance on the subject, very justly felt, that what appeared to her as only the loss of a very useless accumulation of wealth, would to Lady Amelia, to Annie, and to Sir William Lawrence, as well as to the unhappy Victor himself, bring the miserable sensation of having been the cause of ruin to a loving friend.

Clara would have given a great deal more at that moment to have saved her friends from this sensation, than she would have done to secure to herself the certainty that her fortune would remain uninjured.

But no such choice was within her reach; neither did any choice rest with her as to what was immediately to be done. She had promised Lady Amelia to report to her the result

of her interview with Victor, and this painful promise she now hastened to fulfil.

She did not reach the room of her anxious friend before she was expected. Lady Amelia started from her seat the moment the door of her room was opened, and hastened to meet her.

So many various, not to say contradictory, feelings had occupied Clara since they parted, that the expression of her countenance was rather that of a person bewildered, than thoroughly informed on any subject, either painful or the reverse.

Lady Amelia instantly perceived this, and exclaimed with very evident disappointment, "You know nothing, Clara! What then is to become of us? We have not a single human being near us, to whom we can apply for information, and yet it is quite impossible to doubt that something very painful threatens us."

"And should you be really very miserable, my dear friend," said Clara, kindly taking her hand "should you permit yourself to be really and truly very miserable if we were

to find out that this fine mining concern is a bubble?"

"Then Victor HAS opened his heart to you on the subject?" returned Lady Amelia, with a frown of very painful anxiety.

"No, my dear friend; Victor has not opened his heart at all more to me than he has done to you. It is evident that, despite all our talk of colds and sickness, you have discovered that he is unhappy, and I certainly think that I have discovered the same. There is but one source, dear Lady Amelia, from whence his unhappiness can arise. His fondly-loved wife, and his beautiful child, are all and everything he could wish them to be, and, for himself, he cannot fail of being conscious that we all love him and value him, as I truly believe he deserves to be loved and valued. Where then are we to look for any cause of the unhappiness we witness, save in some disappointment of his hopes of pecuniary advantage from these boasted mines?"

"If such be indeed the cause of the melancholy change we see in him," replied Lady Amelia, "I could, as far as I am concerned,

very sincerely assure him that, in my opinion, the failure of his hopes need not, and ought not, to affect him thus I am quite as much convinced as he can be himself, that no shadow of blame attaches to him ; and if we can only bring him to speak openly on the subject to us, I think we could soon make him understand that no possible failure of these tiresome mines, need affect our domestic happiness in the slightest degree. Your noble gift, Clara, and my small but safe little income, furnish ample security against any real pecuniary misery."

Poor Clara felt at that moment that she very truly and sincerely pitied *herself*

Had she not unhappily conceived the vague suspicion which her imperfect recollection of her interview with Monsieur Roche suggested, the words of Lady Amelia would have made her feel most perfectly happy Nothing could be in more perfect accordance with her own sentiments Her consciousness that great wealth was *not* a source of happiness, was so deeply rooted in her heart, and so perfectly sincere, that the words of her friend seemed

like the echo of her own thoughts ; and her first impulse was to exclaim, " How delightful it is to know that our feelings and judgment are in such very perfect accord !"

Lady Amelia's reply was equally cordial and energetic ; and then it was that poor Clara felt as if her own evil destiny threatened to overwhelm and defeat, not only all her own efforts to ensure the happiness of those she loved, but all the better blessings also, which their own high principles and right thinking would otherwise ensure them.

She knew, and she felt, with very terrible certainty, that however resolutely and successfully they might study to be satisfied with the moderate income which happily seemed beyond the reach of accident, *they* would not witness with the same philosophy any diminution of her fortune, if occasioned by her efforts to assist them

The thought most nearly approaching consolation, which occurred to her on the subject, arose from remembering that if her still vague suspicions proved correct, it was her *own* carelessness which had occasioned it, and no

abuse of confidence, or want of caution, in those she had sought to serve.

It is possible, perhaps, that if the Honourable Henry Octavius Hamilton's spirit could have been cognisant of the thoughts which in that hour occupied her's, he might *not* have deemed the possession of city-born wealth as too deep a pollution to be atoned for

But, luckily for her own tranquillity, it did not occur to Clara, during these painful ruminations, that none of the dangers which now threatened them would have been incurred, had Lady Amelia submitted to receive the aid which had been so earnestly and so safely offered.

But these sage reflections will not help me in telling my story, on the contrary, they seem more like evading, or, at least, postponing the catastrophe

The next time Victor met his wife, her mother, and their matchless friend, at table, he very evidently exerted himself to converse cheerfully.

He appeared, however, very anxious to learn

from Lady Amelia whether her uncle, Sir William Lawrence, had given any intimation of speedily returning to Paris; and when she replied that, so far from it, she thought he was likely to visit England before they saw him again, he started, as if this idea was very painful to him

"And his dear friend, Monsieur Roche?" said Clara, raising her pocket handkerchief, so as to permit her looking earnestly at him, without his observing it. "Is he going to England too? They are such great friends, that I should not be at all surprised to hear of it."

Had any doubt rested on the mind of Clara as to the fact that Monsieur Roche was in some way connected with Victor Dormont's secret anxiety, it must have vanished then; for not only an instantaneous change in his complexion was perceptible, but the hand which was carrying a glass of wine to his lips trembled too much to perform the office, and the glass was hastily replaced upon the table.

But both the one and the other passed unobserved by his unsuspicious young wife,

as well as by the greatly re-assured Lady Amelia.

"We have been tormenting ourselves for nothing, Clara!" said her sanguine ladyship, as the three females took their way to the nursery. "I am come back to my old theory, that our poor Victor has had a heavy, feverish cold, which I have no doubt has been made worse by his having a greater share of important business thrown upon him than he has been accustomed to transact without the assistance, and, perhaps, the authority, of his friend, Roche. Victor is still a mere boy in point of age, my dear Clara, and, in my opinion, the fact of his feeling anxious does him honour."

It would have been a great relief to Clara could she have fully opened her heart to her friend. But she felt that it would be a great cruelty to do so, and she resolutely abstained from doing it, but most truly might she have said that it was pain and grief to her.

The affecting a light-hearted gay tone of feeling, when the spirits are oppressed by heavy

anxiety, is no easy task; and in the case of Clara it was daily becoming more difficult, because she began to doubt whether it was right to conceal the suspicions which haunted her.

Might not the confession of them to her unsuspecting friend tend to lessen the vehemence of the blow, if indeed it was destined to fall upon them? This was a question very difficult to answer, and the more so, because the great point, as to whether she was herself involved in it, was still totally beyond her reach

At length, however, she came to a resolution which for a moment was really a decided relief. She determined to drive on the morrow to the house of Monsieur Roche, in the Place Vendôme, and to ask his servants to give her his present address. She was still in the habit of making frequent solitary calls on Madame de Charmont, though she no longer assisted at the spiritual rappings; and this furnished a reason for her going alone, as neither Lady Amelia nor Annie had ever become very intimate with her.

On arriving at the elegant abode of Monsieur Roche, Clara instantly perceived that he was not returned to it, for all the windows in the lower part of the house were closed.

On becoming convinced of this fact, Clara took counsel with herself as to what it would be most judicious for her to do, in order to obtain something more like information than could be derived from the words, "Not at home," which was the only answer she could hope to get, if she inquired for him in the usual way.

After a moment's consideration, therefore, she ordered her servant to open the carriage-door, and having got out, she addressed herself to the porter, requesting that he would furnish her with the means of writing a note to M. Roche, as it was evident from the appearance of the premises, that he was not at home, and she had business of importance to communicate to him. Her equipage, and her appearance, obtained for her a civil degree of attention, despite the very evident confusion of the mansion; and when the porter opened the door of his lodge, in order to invite her

entrance there for the purpose of writing, she asked him, in a very conciliatory tone, "If he would have the kindness to let her go up stairs, where she could write without interruption, as what she had to communicate was of very considerable importance."

And so it certainly was, for it was her purpose to ask M. Roche very distinctly for information respecting the nature of the security which she had given him, in order to obtain the admission of Victor Dormont to a partnership in the mining concern, in which he (M. Roche) was himself interested.

But, although it was fully her intention to transmit this important question, as distinctly as words could do it, to the only person of her acquaintance whom she believed capable of giving her a distinct answer, it was not for the purpose of writing with more convenience that she made this request.

She by no means required any very profoundly tranquil retreat in which to indite a question upon which she had been meditating for many days, and which might be comprised into about half-a-dozen words; but she justly

thought that by penetrating to M. Roche's usual living apartments, she should be able to ascertain more fully than any questionings would enable her to do, whether he was speedily expected to occupy them

The result proved that she was right The civil porter made no difficulty about ushering her up stairs, and into the room which, when she had been taken to view his magnificent collection of pictures, she remembered to have seen occupied as a library; but in doing so, he gave her more information concerning the state of his master's affairs, than any answers he could have given her without this very speaking commentary.

Everything was in disorder.

The pictures were nearly all of them removed from the walls; some were already in packing-cases, while others were lying on the floor, or resting against the chairs and tables, ready to be disposed of in the same manner, many empty cases standing near them, showing plainly enough, that the dispersion of the whole collection was in rapid progress.

Clara wrote her note, because the materials

for doing so were placed before her; but, in fact, she had already received the answer to it.

Had Monsieur Roche been present there, and had he been as true as he most unquestionably was false, he could have told her no more than this scene now disclosed to her.

The mining concern was a bubble! . . It had burst, and M. Roche himself had been overthrown by the concussion!

So much she had learnt by her excursion; and with a certainty which left no shadow of doubt upon her mind, as to the correctness of the inference she had drawn from what she had seen.

But there was still another question to be asked, and answered, before she knew how much, or how little, she was herself affected by this catastrophe. But it was not among the *débris* of M. Roche's tasteful treasures that this information was to be obtained, she therefore folded and sealed her useless little note, placed it in the hands of the civil porter, mounted her carriage, and drove off, with a

strange feeling of uncertainty, as to whether this fine carriage were really her own, or whether its more rightful destination might not be to follow in the wake of the packages which she had just been contemplating.

CHAPTER VIII.

Little, however, did my unfortunate heroine guess the misery that was in store for her!

It was with a smile, less gay, perhaps, than philosophical, that she thought of this possible termination of all her greatness, nevertheless the smile was genuine, there was no shade of sorrow, or even of sadness in it, and so thoroughly had she been taught to feel that wealth did not ensure happiness, that, had the question at issue concerned herself only, it is very probable that she would have dwelt upon her scheme of becoming governess to her little god-child, and dependent upon aunt

Sarah for all her superfluities, till she had very decidedly made up her mind to believe that such an arrangement would ensure her a greater degree of happiness, than any other she could think of

But she certainly shrunk from the idea of what Lady Amelia, Annie, and Victor would feel, if this famous wealth of hers were all to vanish, and melt into thin air, in consequence of her friendship for them

Yet there was, luckily for her, one little circumstance in the affair from whence she assuredly did derive very great and substantial consolation, and here I must observe, that although my story involves the tremendous incongruity of its heroine's making an offer of marriage to a gentleman, and continuing to support life—nay, often to enjoy herself greatly, after this offer was refused, despite of this, I must do her the justice to say, that she had a considerable mixture of good in her character; and I consider it as a proof of this, that the point which she now dwelt upon, as by far the most consolatary circumstance in the misfortune which threatened her, was not one

which would have suggested itself, as a *comfort*, to any but a generous mind.

The idea of being little Clara's governess was "*comforting*;" and so was the perspective she had sketched of aunt Sarah's happiness, when all their little luxuries and indulgences were furnished by her hitherto very superfluous income of five hundred a year; but, as a *consolation*, the consciousness that it was by her *own* carelessness, and not by any fault or imprudence on the part of Victor, that she was likely to lose her fortune, was infinitely more precious to her than any other ameliorating circumstance whatever.

But speculating on the character of my heroine will not help on my narrative, which has now reached a point which it is certainly painful to dwell upon.

Having replaced herself in rather a melancholy mood in the corner of the carriage, and ordered it to drive home, her thoughts employed themselves in speculations upon the best and least painful way of making the dear, unconscious Annie aware of the real state of affairs. She by no means approved of Victor's

system for preserving her peace, by concealing the facts by which her conduct ought to be regulated, and her mind prepared for the change which awaited her, and the thoughts of Clara were so earnestly occupied upon this theme, and by endeavouring to decide upon the least painful means of awakening the happy young mother to the disagreeable fact, that cutting teeth was *not* the only earthly care deserving attention, that she had arrived within sight of her own door before she thought that half the distance had been traversed.

And what was it which then awakened her to the fact that she had reached her home? Was it the sight of the peculiarly neat and quiet *porte cochère*? Decidedly not, for this well-known entrance presented a scene as unlike any she had ever witnessed there, as it was well possible to conceive. A miscellaneous crowd of all ranks so filled the gateway, that it was impossible for the carriage to drive in, without endangering their lives or limbs.

Her first words were a request that the door of the carriage might be opened, for her to get

out; but it was not immediately that this request could be complied with, for the footman whose duty it was to attend to it had sprang from his place, and might be seen struggling vehemently to make his way through the throng, in order to approach the object which evidently attracted every eager eye, and every eager step

This object was immediately perceived by the terrified Clara to be the body of a man, but a garment which was loosely thrown over him, as well as the intervening crowd, rendered it perfectly impossible for her to ascertain whether he was known to her, or a stranger

Neither her doubt nor her terror were of a quality to endure delay. By a vehement effort she forced open the door of the carriage, and heedless of any danger, sprung upon the pavement Her appearance, and the fact of the carriage having attempted to enter the *porte cochère* naturally suggested the idea, that her interest in the scene was not that of a stranger, and more than one friendly hand was extended to prevent her from falling as she sprung from the carriage But unconscious either of help or hindrance, the miserable Clara pushed on,

till her first frightful presentiment was fulfilled, by finding herself standing beside the dead body of Victor Dormont.

It would be equally vain and needless to attempt any description of the suffering which this spectacle produced.

She became faint and sick, to a degree that made her sustaining herself a matter of difficulty; but she was utterly unconscious of it. Annie,—her dearly-loved, but most wretched Annie,—was the only living thing which at that moment she seemed distinctly to remember.

"*Par sa propre main?*" was muttered by more than one voice in the surrounding crowd.

But no voice was needed to awaken the dreadful suggestion in her mind. The spoken words, however, were useful, for they roused her to the necessity of at once taking measures to conceal the terrible fact from his wife.

Nothing could have restored Clara so effectually to strength, both of mind and body, as the hoping that this might still be possible.

She looked anxiously at the people crowding round her, in search of some one who might

understand and assist her purpose. Nor did she look in vain. A middle-aged man, of perfectly respectable appearance, whose hand had given her very effectual aid in her abrupt descent from the carriage, still stood near her as she hung, during a moment of unspeakable agony, over the young and comely, but now most ghastly features of poor Victor! Instantly addressing this stranger, she said, "He was a most dear friend, and his young wife is more than a sister to me! Let us not destroy her too, by stating that his own hand did it! Disperse this dreadful crowd, and tell them that the assassin *is known*. By doing this you may save both her reason and her life!"

Poor Clara, amidst all her misfortunes, was lucky here. She might have gone far before she met another stranger as quick to comprehend, and as willing to obey her wishes, as the one she now addressed.

He stated something better than a merely innocent falsehood, to persuade the by-standers of his knowing a great deal more about the cause of this dreadful event than he could explain at that moment, specifically stating,

however, that "the idea of the gentleman's having destroyed *himself* was quite erroneous, ... and that the infamous assassin's only chance of escaping justice was, by his persuading people that the unfortunate young gentleman had destroyed himself."

Having made this statement with great energy, he set off at a rapid pace, as if in search of further information, and (as he hoped and expected) the curious crowd all followed him, in the hope that, as he had already told them so much, he might be able to tell them a little more.

When left alone with the object of her bitter grief, the porter, and the servants who had attended the carriage, poor Clara's first care was to ensure their silence as to the probable manner of the unfortunate Victor's death.

There was certainly some degree of doubt attached to this; for a pistol discharged at his head by the hand of another would have produced the same effect as if discharged by his own; and Clara might, perhaps, have availed herself of this obvious fact, for the sake of sparing his young and loving wife the addi-

tional pang of believing that her misery was the desperate result of his own act. But the first effect produced by the examination of the body by the servants was, the finding a letter in his pocket addressed to Miss Holmwood.

This was immediately given to her, accompanied by the obvious remark, that it was doubtless written to explain the cause of the fearful deed he had committed.

To reply to so rational a conjecture by any attempt to deny its truth, would have been equally injudicious and vain; she therefore directed all her powers of persuasion to the object of convincing all who heard her, that the kindest conduct which could possibly be pursued towards the unhappy young widow, would be the keeping her for ever ignorant of the fact that he had destroyed himself.

Her earnest pleading was listened to with too much attention, and too much sympathy also, to fail of its desired effect. The body of the unfortunate Victor was very noiselessly deposited in the sleeping apartment of the porter, from whence it could be removed without any risk of its being encountered by poor

Annie, during the period of her unvarying visit to the nursery, after the return of her darling from its daily airing in the gardens of the Tuileries.

This melancholy and important object having been achieved, without the knowledge of any individual of the family, save those engaged in it, the almost heart-broken Clara stole with a noiseless step to her own bed-room, and, having secured the door, threw herself on the bed with the consciousness of more acute misery than had ever before fallen upon her.

That which had been conveyed to her by her schoolmaster, on his return from his unfortunate embassy, was of so different a quality that it did not even recur to her memory as a point of comparison.

She was, indeed, most truly and deeply miserable during the wretched hour that she lay sobbing there; and the image of the widowed Annie, and her desolate despair, never left her for a moment.

The first thought which broke in upon this deplorable image arose from her suddenly recollecting the note addressed to herself,

which had been found in the pocket of poor Victor.

She had so hastily conveyed it to her own, that she now scarcely felt certain of having done so, and was relieved from considerable anxiety when she found the document likely to be so really important safely lodged where she had put it—almost unconsciously.

On opening the cover addressed to herself, she found these words inscribed within it—

"I think I could have endured with tolerable fortitude any extremity of ruin which had fallen upon myself, but I can *not* endure to witness its falling upon you, by whose means I have enjoyed two years of greater happiness than I believe often falls to the lot of man. But not even to escape this would I commit the act I meditate, did I not believe that my child, and its dear idolizing mother, would be in a far happier condition after my death, than it could be possible for them ever to enjoy while I remained alive.

"Their place now will be among those who have never been dishonoured.

"And for you, generous, self-forgetting

friend! your impoverished condition would be more terrible still, were you doomed to witness the living endurance of the suffering which can never leave me for a single hour while life endures.

"Let my poor Annie believe that I died by an accident, and let her not read the enclosed, which will show you *all* the nature of the man whom I have been brought up to reverence and love.

"VICTOR DORMONT."

The paper enclosed contained the following lines, both documents being written in French, though translated into English here —

"The bubble is burst, Victor, before either you or I have made the money by it which I anticipated.

"I assure you, my dear boy, that I am not so much to blame as many will fancy, for I truly believed, for a long time, that success, though not quite certain, was very probable.

"I had hoped, too, to get my dearly-beloved pictures off before the crash came, but in this I have been disappointed, as a seizure arrived

when we were in the very act of sending them off.

"I have saved my Murillo, though, which, with the intuitive watchfulness of a fond lover, I had contrived to place in safety before the danger arrived.

"If you love me as much as you ought to do, my dear Victor, you will clap your hands joyfully in the midst of your trouble, at hearing this.

"You will be vexed to hear, though, that your foolish friend the heiress would force herself and her name into the concern, and of course she must go to the dogs with the rest of us.

"It is satisfactory to know, however, that there is nothing very deplorable in your position Your ten thousand pounds in settlement, and the reversion of Lady Amelia's jointure, which in like manner is settled upon your wife, will put you safely beyond the reach of any serious pecuniary embarrassments. Only remember you must not indulge yourself in buying pictures, my dear boy.

"There is certainly a vast deal of pleasure in doing it, but there is a vast deal of risk also.

"If I should be pushed for a few pounds, now and then, before I have contrived to hit upon some new scheme for raising the wind, I shall look to you, my dear Victor, to help me out of the difficulty. I have a notion that the witch of an aunt belonging to the *ci-devant* heiress has got lots of money, and as she has never enjoyed the honour of being a partner in our noble mining concern, I think it likely enough that you may be able to get something out of her; and if I should happen to be pinched, I shall certainly expect that you will make the experiment.

"You would never have got into the snug quarters in which you now find yourself, if I had not pushed you into the patronage of my much-esteemed friend, Sir William Lawrence.

"You shall hear from me again, my dear boy, when I know a little more about my future plots and plans than I do at present. *Vale!*"

The perusal of this letter, which was signed with the well-known initials of Monsieur Roche, explained to Clara, only too clearly, the feelings which had led to the fatal act which had for the time put every other calamity out of her head.

But the more clearly it explained poor Victor's terrible act, the more poignantly did it make her lament it.

All the feelings for which they all had so dearly loved and cherished him, were made only the more manifest, by the fatal deed which had deprived them of him for ever!

The consciousness that his pertinacious refusal to accept Clara's assistance on the terms under which it was offered, had evidently been a greater burthen upon his heart and spirits than he had strength to support; and then, as if to complete the misery of having lost a friend so precious to herself and to those she so fondly loved, she was doomed to feel that her own ignorance and carelessness, during her fatal interview with the villainous Roche, had probably been the ultimate cause of it.

She recalled, however, with a feeling somewhat akin to consolation, the long series of delusions respecting the position and character of Roche, which had led to their believing that his adopted son, and, as he often delicately hinted, his future heir, might be safely admitted to the intimacy which had ended so deplorably; and her sober judgment told her, that the sensitive and ardent-tempered Victor would scarcely have been saved from the despair which had overpowered him, merely by her being left in the possession of the over-grown fortune, which he well knew she did not greatly prize

This persuasion, which was as just as it was consolatory, did more towards restoring the courage of poor Clara, and silencing her self-reproaches, than any thing else could have done; and she felt too, that her yielding herself to the influence of such idle self-reproach, for not having been inspired with a suspicion *that a much-esteemed gentleman was a villain*, was not likely to be the most effectual way of making herself useful to her suffering friends.

Luckily for them, and for herself, this rational and well-timed thought soon overpowered all her vague notions of self-condemnation respecting the infamous fraud which had been practised upon her; and once more my noble-hearted heroine forgot herself so thoroughly, as to make her as efficient as she was affectionate, in performing the terrible task which lay before her.

That Clara, in preparing herself for this task, felt neither any increase or diminution of her energy, from remembering that from being one of the richest heiresses extant, she had become dependent for her daily bread upon the bounty of aunt Sarah, must not be criticised as unnatural.

The most important fact connected with the memory of her by-gone greatness, was its having been the cause of her committing the unseemly act of hinting to the man she loved, that, if he asked for her hand, neither his poverty nor her wealth would prevent its being accepted.

The fact *next* in importance to this was, that though she had (luckily) succeeded in

securing a moderate independence to her much-loved Annie, she had not achieved this without causing something very like mortification, if not positive pain, to her also much-loved Lady Amelia; and the third item in this list of pecuniary recollections was, that, being in full and independent possession of enormous wealth, she had *not* possessed sufficient common sense and presence of mind to prevent its being wrested from her by a most shallow fraud.

It required no very long meditation on all these incontrovertible facts, to convince Clara that Nature had *not* gifted her with that particular species of good sense which is required for the judicious management of wealth; and her resignation under the loss of it, was quite as genuine as the folly which had caused its loss.

Had there been no aunt Sarah in the case, her feelings and meditations on the subject would doubtless have been very different; for though she very candidly acknowledged to herself the want of judgment and appreciation of character which had so repeatedly led her

to cause pain to Lady Amelia Wharton, when her only object had been to serve her, she could not help feeling that no such misfortune was likely to occur between herself and aunt Sarah, when the melancholy fact of her own destitute condition, and absolute dependence for her daily bread upon the bounty of the old lady, should be made known to her.

This interval of rather consolatory self-examination, however, was not permitted to last long; my unfortunate heroine had a harder task to perform than the reconciling herself, or her aunt either, to their altered position; and it was almost a deadly qualm which for a moment came over her as she recollected the insignificance of her own loss, when compared to that which she had to announce to her beloved Annie.

How was it to be done? In what words, under what falsehoods was the frightful fact of his self-slaughter to be concealed from her? How every other part of the history she had to communicate, seemed to sink into insignificance when compared to this. For a short, but very terrible interval, the aching brain of

Clara dwelt on the possibility that the reason of the unhappy young creature would give way, and that the news she had to tell might make her a maniac for life!

This "horrible imagining" had, however, one good effect; for it was so much too terrible that Clara started up, desperately determined to ruminate no longer in solitude, but to seek Lady Amelia without a moment's delay, and concert with her the best means of keeping the horrible fact of the suicide from the knowledge of Annie for ever.

Not a moment more was now lost in preparation for the task before her; for although, when she caught sight of her own face in the mirror, she positively started at its ghastly paleness, she felt that even the mitigated statement she meant to give, had quite enough of horror in it, to account for the fearful change in her own aspect

As she descended the stairs which led from her own room to that of Lady Amelia, the possibility that she might not find her there, and that she might be with Annie in the nursery, suggested itself; and the idea of this

addition to the difficulties of her terrible task, made her knock almost vehement; but the door was instantly opened by Lady Amelia herself.

She had not felt startled when she heard the knock; but the sight of poor Clara's colourless face and streaming eyes caused her to utter a cry which very nearly amounted to a scream.

Clara seized her hands, and almost vehemently pushed her back into the room, closing the door, which she bolted behind her, as she followed.

When the painful task of communicating evil tidings is assigned to us, we all wish, I believe, for sufficient strength of mind to perform it resolutely. But in poor Clara's case it was decidedly better for her that she failed in this, for her fearful task was half done before she had uttered a word.

"Tell me at once, Clara! Some one is dead .... Is it the child? .... Is it my Annie?"

For a moment there was certainly relief in

being able to answer "No! no! no!.... Neither, neither!"

"Then it is Victor!" said Lady Amelia, in a tone that was almost stern, and which carried very distinctly the meaning—"Do not attempt to deceive me!"

Poor Clara bent her head with trembling acknowledgment of the fact; and then, with that truly feminine *tact* which teaches us to know which, among many sorrows, it is the most difficult to bear with resignation, she replied—"Not Annie!—no! nor her baby either! But HE is gone, Lady Amelia!—*Gone by his own hand!* For her sake—for your precious Annie's sake, let this horror sink into your heart, even as it has sunk into mine! Deep, deep, let it lie there ... Your love for her and him, for her child, may enable her to bear his death without the loss of life or reason . But it might not be so if she knew that he died by his own hand."

The truth of this seemed to reach the heart of Lady Amelia more vividly than any other circumstance connected with the terrible event now communicated to her

"You are right! you are right! my Clara!" she exclaimed. "But how are we to keep it from her?" she added, in a manner which showed plainly enough that amidst all the melancholy mystery, this was the question most important to her heart.

Clara, before she answered it, remained for one moment silent, with her head supported by her hand, endeavouring to recall every circumstance which had occurred, in order to decide upon what it would be most desirable and most *possible* to conceal, and what it would not, and while this meditation lasted, the over-wrought faculties of the usually self-possessed Lady Amelia seemed absolutely suspended, and she waited for the trembling Clara's words, as if it were the decree of fate which was about to be announced to her.

Poor Clara felt the weight of this awful responsibility in every nerve. She felt that, if at this moment she judged wrongly, or acted rashly, the life or the reason of the desolate Annie might be the sacrifice; but she felt too that she must not shrink from the task, for that the pale friend who stood trembling

before her was still less capable of forming any rational judgment than herself.

"She must *never* know that he destroyed himself," said Clara, in a tone of positive decision, which expressed plainly enough that on this point there must be neither doubt nor appeal . . . . "Neither must we attempt to persuade her," she added, "that he died a natural death. It will, I fear, be impossible to prevent her seeing him, and the marks of violence are such as to leave no doubt of the fact that his death was caused by human agency."

"If she retains her reason, poor child! she will easily be led to perceive," said Lady Amelia, "that we have no more means of knowing the motive of the assault than she has; but it will be best for the servants, or for us, to suggest the probability that the deed was committed in an attempt to rob him."

"Oh, yes! She may thus be saved from the last, worst horror! She may be spared," she added, "the agony of knowing that the unhappy boy, to whom she gave her heart,

had not sufficient courage to endure a pecuniary disappointment!.... For, of course, we must presume, Clara, that the failure of this golden vision, which evidently turned my uncle's brain, was the real cause of this desperate act."

"There is no other way of accounting for it," replied Clara, quietly; "and the depression of spirits, and the failing health, which both you and I have noticed, must, in some degree, have prepared us for the comparatively, very slight grief of witnessing this misfortune."

"And so it has, Clara," replied her friend, in a tone which, if it could not be termed cheerful, was, at least, equally far from being despairing. "I *have* been daily anticipating the news of some such pecuniary disappointment; but your noble gift to my Annie made me feel then, as I do now, exceedingly indifferent on the subject."

This was said with very perfect sincerity, and listened to by Clara with a feeling as nearly approaching pleasure as it was possible for her to be conscious of at such a moment.

But it may be doubted, if the philosophy of her ladyship would have been as nearly in sympathy with that of her young comforter, had she guessed what *her* share in this "*disappointment*" was likely to be.

"Sufficient to the day is the evil thereof," thought Clara, as she impressed an improving kiss on the hand she held; "there is no occasion whatever that either Lady Amelia or poor Annie should be made acquainted just now with the folly I have committed," and really dismissing the idea of it from her mind as completely as from her words, she added, "Then all our thoughts, all our care, all our endeavours, must and will be directed to one only object, namely, to that of sustaining our poor darling under her affliction! I have already done much towards establishing the belief that our poor Victor was assassinated. I will now, if you will undertake to keep your Annie in the nursery, return to the porter's room, where the body has been deposited, and cause it to be removed up stairs. I *know* she will insist upon seeing it, and she will not be taken into the porter's lodge."

"No! no! no!" replied the sobbing Lady Amelia, who seemed to anticipate, in trembling, the dreadful scene that they had to witness. . . . . "Nobody must be near her, Clara, but you and I!"

"Then prepare to go to her at once, my poor friend!" said my pitying heroine, her own tones almost choking her as she spoke; "and I will, at the same time, have the body removed. But be very careful, dear friend, not to let her leave the nursery till this is accomplished! Do you think you shall be able to manage this?"

"Your question, my dearest Clara, awakens and points out the only rational hope we have for seeing our poor Annie survive this dreadful blow. . . . The loved Victor! She loved him fondly—devotedly; and never, I am quite sure, during her still young life, did any other man ever suggest the idea of love to her. No! Victor Dormont was the first, her only love. And yet, Clara," continued Lady Amelia, "I am quite as sure of another fact, as I am of that; I am quite sure that, dearly as she loved Victor, she loves his child more dearly

still.... You have hardly had time or opportunity to make the observation yet, but I have. There are two classes of women, Clara, very easily to be distinguished from each other by an observing eye; the one of these will be found to love the husband of her choice beyond all other earthly things; the other will be found as pre-eminently to love their children. I have noted, and known, many admirable women belonging to each; and I might not, perhaps, find it very easy to decide to my own satisfaction in which of the two I had found most persons, and most qualities, to be admired. You will not, therefore, fancy, dearest Clara, that I throw any slur upon the conjugal attachment of our Annie, when I say that she belongs to the ultra or extra maternal class."

"I am not, perhaps, a very good judge—certainly not an experienced one," replied Clara, thoughtfully; "but I can conceive that such a difference may exist in different temperaments; and also that our Annie, as you say, may belong to the ultra or extra maternal. God grant that it may prove so! In

that case, we may still hope to see that sweetest and gentlest of human hearts looking forward, with hope, for the future!"

"I do believe it!" returned Lady Amelia, earnestly. "And let this belief strengthen and encourage us both, my dearest Clara! We have neither of us, I am quite sure, been insensible to the amiable qualities of poor Victor; and we have both of us loved him affectionately. But if we examine our hearts, Clara, shall we not find that Annie, Annie, Annie, has been the real spring which set this loving feeling in action?"

"It may be so," said Clara, with a gentle sigh; "and if so, his child shall inherit our affection for him; and we may yet live to see that precious little creature the source of a long life of happiness to our darling Annie! Now go then, dear friend; I will keep watch on the staircase for a minute or two, that you may give me notice if you find her about to leave the nursery."

"There is no danger of that, Clara," replied Lady Amelia, with a melancholy smile; "I have only to ask some nursery question, con-

cerning the sleeping, or the waking, or the walking, or the talking, of your little god-daughter, and I could keep Annie eagerly occupied in answering me for hours together."

"And let us thank God for it, my dear friend," replied Clara, earnestly. "Our best hopes for the future rest there."

And so they parted, Clara being not aware, or rather, being totally unmindful of the fact, that in this interview, which was intended to put Lady Amelia in full possession of all the calamities which had befallen them, had left her as perfectly ignorant of the news that the loss of her own fortune was among them, as if it had not taken place.

CHAPTER IX.

HAVING watched the door of the nursery close upon her friend, and after waiting with a beating heart for a few minutes to see that it did not open again, Clara, sick at heart, and trembling in every limb, entered the porter's lodgings for the purpose of arranging everything for the removal of poor Victor's body with as little delay and as little noise as possible.

She was fortunate in her choice of assistance, for there was not one among the persons she employed who did not sympathize most sincerely with her in wishing to spare the still unconscious young widow the additional misery of knowing that her husband had died by his own hand.

Everybody loved poor Annie. It might have been said of her, without any great exaggeration, that she had never exchanged a word with any of her fellow-creatures without creating in them an inclination to love her.

Her youthful, innocent-looking beauty, her sweet, cheerful voice, the unselfish temper so very perceptible in everything she said and did, had rendered her through her whole life not only a favourite, but positively a *darling* to everybody connected with her.

No wonder was it, therefore, that every voice was softened to a whisper, and every movement to a stealthy silence, when the object was to spare her the fearful anguish of being made acquainted with the terrible manner of her husband's death.

But there was something more than kind—there was something heroic in the manner in which Clara performed her part in this strange and ghastly task

I suspect, that if the human mind, or rather, perhaps, if human actions were nicely analyzed, it would be found that the noblest deeds proceeded neither from courage, nor from philo-

sophical reasoning, but from an absence of selfishness.

My Clara not only did not think of herself, but she positively contrived *not* to feel for herself during the whole of these ghastly arrangements; nor did she even indulge in that burst of weeping by which kind Nature so often permits the swelling heart of a suffering woman to relieve itself, till her terrible task was done, and that everything visible to the eye seemed to give evidence that the unfortunate Victor had been slain by the thieves who were supposed to have robbed him.

But this work being carefully accomplished, she did at last give way to the impulse which led her to throw her shaking limbs upon the bed, and weep.

This indulgence, perhaps, saved her from the more dangerous results of what she had endured, which might probably have fallen upon her without it.

Her pulse throbbed with less vehement rapidity; and her terror, lest she should fail in her great object of protecting Annie from a knowledge of the whole ghastly truth, being at

length removed, she again felt herself sufficiently in possession of her own powers of mind to give her the hope of being still useful to those she loved.

It was not long after she had thus recovered her self-possession, before the idea of her very dear, but almost forgotten aunt Sarah, recurred to her. And now it was no longer Annie alone whose feelings under the calamity which had fallen upon them demanded her tender watchfulness.

How would aunt Sarah endure the terrible conviction, that an event of such heavy misery had come upon her dear laughing little playfellow, as might almost preclude the hope of ever seeing her laugh again?

The very peculiarly intimate and loving friendship which subsisted between old aunt Sarah and the youthful Annie has been already described, and the satisfaction which this had occasioned to Clara has been sufficiently dwelt upon to make it very evident that more guardian-angel's work remained for my heroine to perform before she could lay her aching head upon her pillow, and seek relief in the

heavy sleep of exhaustion and weariness. Although the tender conscience of Clara had often of late reproached her for not having, in her early days, paid sufficient attention to the temperament and character of aunt Sarah to enable her to make herself as agreeable a companion to her as the playful Annie had been, she now, at least, gave very decided proof that this study had not been altogether neglected, for nothing but a pretty intimate knowledge of the heart and soul of the old lady could have made my heroine so very nearly indifferent, as she certainly was, to the effect which the knowledge of her own loss of fortune was likely to have on her. Nay, more than once she had found a very comfortable degree of consolation from the conviction, that the having to look to this loving aunt for her daily bread, would be so genuine a source of happiness to the kind-hearted old woman, as to go far towards reconciling her to her loss.

But far different was the effect which this intimate knowledge of her character produced now. The same feeling, though in a less

painful degree, which had caused such strenuous efforts to conceal from the young widow the awful manner of her husband's death, now made poor Clara raise her aching head from the pillow, in order to take measures for keeping her aunt in ignorance of it also.

And she was well rewarded for her thoughtful care; for, this most fearful feature being left out, aunt Sarah did not lose her self-possession for a moment, but speedily showed herself capable of being a very useful friend and counsellor, in this hour of anxiety and grief.

It would be useless to enter into any details descriptive of the melancholy scenes which followed this frightful catastrophe.

The agony of the poor young widow may be much more easily imagined than described. Never was the cunning *instinct* of a woman's *heart* more evident than in the simple-minded aunt Sarah upon this occasion. The feature which the most alarmed them all, in the condition of the bereaved young widow, was an air of almost unconscious listlessness concerning everything that surrounded her.

She seemed to feel that her own life, as that

of an active human being, had ended with that of her murdered husband.

Of the important event which had befallen Clara she knew nothing, nor would she, probably, have paid any great attention to the statement had it been laid before her.

There was something dreadfully melancholy in this apathy, for it spoke more eloquently than any words could have done of that deep sense of bereavement which had left nothing of sufficient interest to rouse her from it. Her child, indeed, still occupied, though it no longer cheered her hours; for it was easy to perceive, as she gazed upon it, that its fatherless condition was the idea which occupied her more than either its smiles or its beauty.

"This will never do, Clara!" said aunt Sarah, after watching an unsuccessful attempt to make poor Annie smile by some tricks of the little one. "Why, she might as well be dead herself, as live on in this way. There is but one thing I can think of, my dear," added the old lady, after having sat in silent meditation for a minute or two. "If Lady Amelia

don't object, I should like to try an experiment."

"An experiment, aunt Sarah!" replied Clara, shaking her head with a very melancholy smile. "Have we not been making experiments ever since this misery came upon us? I certainly did hope much from the pretty ways and increasing intelligence of her sweet child; but I think the looking at her does Annie more harm than good, for her eyes invariably fill with tears whenever the pretty creature does anything particularly to excite our admiration"

"Yes, I have observed that as well as you, my dear, and it is enough to break one's heart, for it is so easy to guess all the dismal thoughts which are at work in hers But my experiment would have nothing to do with the child's pretty ways, or her dismal way of thinking about them; quite the contrary, Clara. What I would do, if I had my way, would be to frighten her a little about the child"

"Frighten her, aunt Sarah?" returned her niece, with a look of great astonishment. "I

think it might be the means of ending all her sorrows at once," she added; "for I greatly doubt if she is in a state to endure any great alarm; her nerves have been fearfully shaken, aunt Sarah!" This was said with a gravity almost stern; for though Clara had no positive fear that the life of her widowed friend was in immediate danger, she felt a nervous sort of anxiety about her, which made the idea of her being *frightened* greatly more alarming than hopeful.

But aunt Sarah nodded her head with the air of one who knew too well what she was talking about, to be easily disconcerted.

"I know," she replied, "that if my notion is acted upon at all, it must be done very carefully and cleverly. But I know poor Annie's looks and ways quite as well as her own mother does, Clara. The great change in her is not so much that she frets, or weeps, or mourns, or whatever you might say of common grief, for she is very quiet, very quiet indeed; and my notion is, that she has made up her mind that there is nothing on this side the grave that is worth caring for. The baby

is looking more beautiful than ever, and growing more clever and amusing every day it lives; but nobody ever sees Annie smile, let it be as funny as it will! Now I would not mind making a bet, Clara, that if the doctor, or any one else, could fairly put it into her head that the baby, notwithstanding all its pretty looks, was not going on well, Annie's whole condition would be changed by it. Instead of thinking all night and all day of one single thing, about which you know nothing can be done, or changed, she might likely enough take it into her head, that something *might* be done for the baby; and if she *did*, Clara, you would see her come round out of her dead-alive condition in no time."

This was not the first time that aunt Sarah had harangued her niece Clara with considerable effect; and most assuredly upon this occasion the old lady's words did not fall to the ground.

"I do believe that there is a faculty deserving the character of intelligence, which is seated not in the brain, but in the heart," was the mental reply of Clara.

To her aunt she only said, but with all the approbation that a smile could give, "I do think, aunt Sarah, that it is very possible you may be right! At any rate the trial is well worth making, and it shall be made. How shall we set about it, aunt Sarah? Either you or I must feign sickness, I think, and send for Dr. Charmont. When he comes, we must let him into our plot. He is by no means a dull man, and if he agrees in our view of the case, I have no doubt that he will so manage matters as to give the experiment a fair trial. It will be very easy, you know, to let him see the child by accident."

"Yes, my dear, very easy," replied aunt Sarah, with a look as full of satisfaction as ever beamed upon the countenance of a minister upon seeing an important suggestion well received. "And which of us had best be ill, my dear?"

"I am quite ready, if you wish me to enact the part," said Clara, with a somewhat melancholy smile.

"You are always ready to do anything and everything that can be useful to those you

love!" replied her aunt, looking at her with an eye quite as expressive as that of the most brilliant beauty of twenty-five could have been; "but I think, my dear, that it is very likely you may be wanted in your capacity of a quite healthy person; therefore, if you please, Clara, *I* will be sick, and I will beg you to send as soon as convenient for Dr. Charmont; I am quite prepared to be poorly; but it is *you*, Clara, who must explain to him the particular sort of sickness, you know, and then he must see the baby, by accident, of course, and all the rest, I think, will come easy enough. If the doctor does his part *well*, I don't think you will long see our dear Annie creeping about as if she were half dead already, and looking as if she were longing to be so quite."

Clara, in spite of all her sorrows, could not help smiling at this newly-developed scheming talent in her simple-minded aunt Sarah. But she remembered the French proverb, "*Soyez amant, et vous seriez inventif*," which perfectly explained the phenomenon; for never was a human heart more thoroughly

in love, than was that of aunt Sarah, both for Annie and her child.

The scheme succeeded perfectly.

All French folks know how to *jouez la comédie*, and the friendly physician played his part so well, that in the course of a few days every trace of the sort of morbid insensibility which had so justly alarmed the friends of poor Annie, had vanished before this strongest feeling of her nature, *maternal love*.

Nor did this worst symptom of despairing grief ever return again. Whether she ever reasoned upon the subject, may be doubted; probably not. She had been taught to feel that the earth still possessed something worth living for, and she never again forgot it!

CHAPTER X.

It was only by degrees, and by degrees by no means very rapid in succession, that my heroine felt quite sure that she fully understood her own position.

Although quite aware, as of course she could not fail to be, that it was absolutely necessary that her partner friend should be made acquainted with the change in her pecuniary position; her reluctance to enter upon the subject with Lady Amelia herself, was insurmountable.

She knew it could not be done without betraying to her the very painful fact, that this ruin would never have fallen upon her,

had her ladyship permitted poor Victor to accept the assistance she had offered, to the amount necessary for procuring the greatly-desired loss of his position as *clerk*.

She too well knew the effect which this inevitable inference would be sure to produce on the sensitive mind of her ladyship; and, had Clara possessed anything more to lose, she would rather have ran the risk of doing it, than encounter the miserable aspect of poor Lady Amelia, upon her being made acquainted with the real facts of the case.

After spending more hours and more anxious thoughts upon all the possible ways of escaping this calamity than she had given, or was likely to give to her own share in the catastrophe, she at length determined to let things take their course, without her attempting to throw any light upon the subject, till the return of Sir William Lawrence should enable her to obtain more specific information concerning them, and also assist her in so managing her affairs as to prevent Lady Amelia, for a time at least, from becoming aware of the utter ruin which had fallen upon her.

Her first effort to obtain assistance in the various, but *all* very difficult tasks which lay before her, was the writing to Sir William Lawrence.

Though no one seemed exactly to know where the gay old bachelor was likely to be found at the present moment, Lady Amelia gave her an address which would be sure to convey a letter to him without any great loss of time; and no explanation was necessary when Clara asked for it, beyond the obvious fact, that the sooner he knew of the terrible death of his dearly-beloved Victor, the earlier would his return be, to his poor widow and her mother.

That this was but a secondary motive in the mind of Clara was very certain; her *first* was the hope of being able to learn from Sir William Lawrence something, more or less *certain*, respecting the terribly mysterious commercial concern in which it appeared that she was herself so unfortunately involved.

But my unlucky Clara, though very evidently not intended by nature for a woman of

business, had many other knotty difficulties perplexing her, which must be untied by herself, if she ever hoped to have them untied at all.

The most immediately important among these, was concerning the immediate (or very speedy) change of residence which her altered circumstances made necessary. She had done so much to embellish the house, and it had become so well known as one of the most desirable dwellings in Paris, that she felt little or no anxiety on that subject; being pretty tolerably certain that the landlord would be only too glad to take it off her hands.

Neither did the disposal of the many costly articles of additional furniture which she had put in it, greatly trouble her. If they sold well, so much the better for aunt Sarah, who, for the future, was to be her only paymaster. And if not, it could occasion neither repentance nor regret; for if she had not purchased them, the money they had cost would not now be hers.

All this was rapidly gone over, and easily

settled in her mind; the great question which remained, being the one concerning their future residence.

She felt that it would be very grievous to her to separate herself from Lady Amelia and Annie; but there were great difficulties in arranging any scheme by which this separation might be avoided.

The feeling the nearest approaching *pain* which the loss of her wealth had hitherto cost her, arose from her remembering that their remaining together could never again be the means of her assisting the slender income of her friend.

On the contrary, the effort which under any such arrangement she was very sure would be made to make her forget the change which had befallen her, could scarcely fail of proving a heavy, if not a ruinous burthen.

Moreover, dearly and truly as she loved both Annie and her mother, she felt a very strong yearning, at the bottom of her heart, for the companionship and the protection of her old schoolmaster.

The approaching marriage of his niece would

leave his comfortable parsonage greatly in want of "a woman at its head," and the income of aunt Sarah would perfectly well enable her to pay liberally for the expenses of both .... *liberally*, though not quite so lavishly as she herself had done in the gloomy golden days of the Brixbourg reign.

This quiet little scheme seemed to smile upon her in the midst of all her anxious uncertainties, most soothingly.

But Clara was not likely, even in solitary meditation, to enjoy any pleasure long, which did not include those she loved in its influence. The widowed Annie, and her truly amiable mother, very speedily made their way to the fore-ground of the picture she was sketching. It was true, that if she left them now, it would be with the consoling reflection, that the only large sum of money which she had ever expended *wisely* during her short-lived wealth, would still abide with them, and, as an addition to Lady Amelia's little income, would put them comparatively at their ease.

But the affection which had grown up amongst them during the three years they

had passed together, rendered such a consideration as this very secondary.

That the society—the *companionship* of her old schoolmaster would afford her a species of enjoyment which she was not enjoying now, and which she certainly never had enjoyed during her Paris life, was a fact of which she was very perfectly aware; yet still she loved these newly-made friends too well to consider any scheme which was entirely to separate her from them, as altogether desirable.

Had they themselves been in a happier position, Clara might not have thought her own society of so much importance to them; but with all her deeply-impressed conviction of the (super) natural distance placed between them by their respective pedigrees, she was too firmly persuaded that they really loved her, not to feel that she could not just now announce any wish or intention to leave them, without being guilty of positive cruelty, as well as ingratitude.

Having reached this point in her mental discussion, she reached also the conviction that she was in a very awkward dilemma.

As to their all remaining together in one of the most costly and elegant dwellings in Paris, expending annually many more thousands than the united incomes of the whole party could now count hundreds; this, at least, was a point which it required no long meditation to decide.

But if they did remain together, where was it to be?

One moment's thought, however, sufficed to make it obvious that it must not be in Paris. And if not in Paris, why should they remain in France? And if not in France, why not return to England? And thus, by an easy and very natural process of reasoning, the only plan which seemed to offer any thing like a hope of consolation and comfort, suggested itself.

If Lady Amelia and Annie should appear, when the question was submitted to them, as free from any particular predilection for any particular residence, as she expected to find them, such an arrangement might be made as would ensure to them all the comfort of remaining together, where they would be as

much beyond reach of suffering from the recollection of all they had lost, as their individual recollections of it would permit.

All this was very reasonable and very satisfactory; but, alas for poor Clara! there was still a great deal of very painful business to be got through, and many painful disclosures still to be made, before this promising scheme could be brought under discussion.

On the terrible subject of her own bankruptcy she determined not to enter till the return of Sir William Lawrence.

There might be some mixture of cowardice in this determination, but there was some wisdom likewise.

She was certainly by no means very sanguine in her hopes of his being able to throw any favourable light upon her own part of these mysterious transactions; for the expressive phrase used by M. Roche when alluding to her having "pushed herself into the concern," signified with sufficient clearness the ruined condition of her finances.

But, nevertheless, she hoped that Sir William, from his great intimacy with that ac-

complished individual, would be able to explain the manner in which she had been enabled thus to ruin herself, more clearly than she felt at all capable of doing herself.

It was therefore a very considerable relief to her to hear from Lady Amelia that she had received a letter from her uncle, announcing his immediate return. Nor did this very welcome letter promise more speed than he shewed in reaching them, for he arrived within twenty-four hours after it.

Sir William Lawrence was very far from being a man of business; and he was far, too, from being active-minded in any way, save that of good fellowship and kindly feeling.

He might have been said to have neglected his own affairs systematically, so constantly had he let every opportunity for his own advancement pass by him without being turned to account. But, on the other hand, he had never in his life permitted himself to be tormented by a dun, or even by the recollection of any long-standing bill existing against him.

He was therefore more ignorant than most

men of everything connected with pecuniary embarrassment, and was as little likely to suspect it among his friends, as to become liable to it himself.

Cautious in forming acquaintance, he certainly was *not*; but neither was he careless, or, more properly speaking, indifferent, either to their manners or acquirements.

Had Roche been a vulgar-minded, as well as a thoroughly-dishonest man, Sir William Lawrence never would have become intimate with him.

But Roche was decidedly a man of taste, as well as a rogue; and unfortunately for Sir William and his friends, this taste gave, as it were, a colouring, and not quite a delusive one, to his conversation at least, when the dark lantern by which he kept watch over his pecuniary concerns, remained very completely out of sight

If Sir William Lawrence had been a young lady of sixteen, instead of an old gentleman of sixty, he could not have been more astonished than he now was at being made acquainted with this man's real character by Clara.

The only document she had to shew, and in fact the only intelligence she had to give, was from the letter found in the pocket of the unfortunate Victor.

But this was quite enough; and the indignation with which the truly honourable old gentleman read this record of the villany of his late intimate associate, was about equal to the grief which he felt at learning that Clara had been made the victim of it.

But on this point my heroine displayed very successful eloquence; it was certainly quite true that she had herself been exceedingly careless and imprudent; and Sir William Lawrence certainly derived very considerable consolation from the earnest and very convincing manner in which she pleaded guilty to all the blame of the transaction.

This point, therefore, having been very comfortably settled between them, their *tête-à-tête* conversation fell upon the much more important subject of the future.

Nor would it have been possible for Clara to have selected a better counsellor.

She could, in fact, speak to him with more

perfect freedom than even to Lady Amelia herself; for having at once frankly avowed to him the perfect penury of her condition, as specifically stated by M. Roche himself, she had no difficulty in making him understand that her retreat, with her aunt, from Paris, must be immediate.

"Of course!—of course, my dear!" replied the old gentleman; "and in the midst of all our troubles we ought to be thankful that you have got such an aunt as that.

"Let any one only watch Annie, with her, and they will see at once what sort of a person she is. I am thankful you have got her—very thankful. You are better off than my poor niece Amelia, Miss Clara; for, take my word for it, aunt Sarah will never run up a friendship with a well-looking, glib-talking swindler, as I have done! Thank God! my dear, for having got such an aunt, and she loves you too as well as if she were your own mother. And then, instead of your ever feeling that you are a burden to her, won't every shilling she spends upon you be a glory and a pride to her? What a blessing

too that she should be independent! Just think of the condition we should all have been in, if her income had been charged upon your fortune!"

Clara very joyfully acknowledged the importance of this (once very indifferent) fact.

"I am sure, Sir William," she added, "that if my dear, good father had asked my advice on the subject, I should have earnestly entreated that I might have enjoyed the great happiness of providing for all her wants and all her wishes! And certain it is, that I have often been ready to repine at being thus deprived of the happiness of proving how much I love her."

"Well, my dear, it is another proof, in addition to not a few that have gone before, that we none of us know what is best for us, and, moreover, my dear Miss Clara, I don't think it is at all impossible that I may live to hear you say that you never were happier in your life than since you have lost your great fortune. But now, tell me, will you, what you think will be best about poor, dear Annie and her mother? They won't do over

well, Miss Clara, if they are altogether parted from you; for you and your good aunt, between you, have spoilt them both, I think, as to caring much about other people. Of course, I know that you can none of you think of going on living here; and, perhaps, it would not be right to propose your going on living with them anywhere, so sad and melancholy as poor Annie is likely to be."

"It would not be the sadness and melancholy of my dear Annie which would impede my making such a proposal, Sir William," replied Clara, very greatly comforted at having this important question thus brought to discussion. "It would be impossible for me now," she continued, "to form any plan for my future life, which should include *them*, without feeling that I was giving up one of my best sources of happiness; but yet I could scarcely venture to propose...."

"What in the world is there you could not venture to propose to them (provided it kept you all together) which they would not welcome as the greatest happiness which could befall them?" exclaimed the warm-hearted old man, eagerly interrupting her."

"Your thinking so, my dear Sir William," replied Clara, with a very happy smile, "will give me all the courage I want. I have no doubt about the fact of our mutual attachment. The whole of our female conclave, baby Clara included, love one another truly. The only point on which I doubt the perfect fitness of such an arrangement is to be found in the fact that my position in society, occasioned by the possession of great wealth, is now so much changed by my loss of it, as to make me feel doubtful whether the old connexions, to whom I look as forming an important feature in my future home, may not 'live and move, and have their being,' in a more humble sphere than would accord with the habits and inclinations of Lady Amelia."

"I should not think it very likely, my dear, that any companions whose society you sought as a source of pleasure, would be found disagreeable by Amelia," replied Sir William, in an accent which indicated, with equal truth and simplicity, that he did not consider this suggestion as any great compliment to his niece. "However," he added, "in all such

matters, ladies must always be left to judge for themselves."

Clara felt the sort of half rebuke which both his words and manner implied; and said, with a degree of earnestness that at once convinced him of her sincerity, "You are right, Sir William, quite right, in believing that those whom I like and love would prove worthy of being liked and loved by Lady Amelia, and by our dear Annie also; my doubts relate only to the retired manner in which they live. The friend in whose house I should wish to seek my home, and that of my aunt also, is the venerable clergyman from whom I received all the education that was ever bestowed upon me. He is the incumbent of a living in a very beautiful part of Gloucestershire, which has an excellent house upon it, large enough, with its ample gardens and pastures, to accommodate a goodly family of about a dozen at least, but in which he is about to be left utterly alone, by the marriage of the niece who has been living with him ever since he took possession of it. It would be a great pleasure to me if, in seeking a pleasant refuge for myself, I could

cheer his solitude by our society, my good aunt being (happily) still rich enough to prevent our being a burden to him. And now, my dear Sir William," she added, cordially, giving him her hand, "you know exactly as much of my hopes and wishes as I do myself; and if you would make our dear Lady Amelia understand them also, you would do me a great service! My money misfortune weighs very lightly on me, I assure you. Thanks to your niece's kindness to me, I have been enabled for the last three years, or near it, to see and enjoy all that is gayest in Parisian life; and it is just enough, I think, to prevent my ever being very anxious to see more of the same sort of thing in any land. But then, you know, I was not to the manner born, and she was; which may make a difference in our judgment upon the subject. But if, after hearing your statement of what has now passed between us, her ladyship should think that our dear Annie might fare better, and change the scene more effectually by accompanying me to England, nay, even into Gloucestershire; I have little, or rather no doubt,

that we might arrange a manner of life there as happy as, considering what we have all suffered of late here, we can reasonably hope for."

This full disclosure of all her hopes and wishes was perfectly unpremeditated on the part of Clara; but she could not have acted more judiciously, had she meditated for a month on the best method of communicating these hopes and wishes to her friend.

Every species of difficulty was removed by it; and her next *tête-à-tête* with Lady Amelia was, on both sides, as free from embarrassment as from doubt; and it certainly left them both with a much nearer approach to consolation at the present moment, and of hope for the future, than either of them had dared to anticipate before it took place.

CHAPTER XI.

THE condition of poor Annie, though such as it was, was dismally sad to contemplate, especially to those who had been accustomed to see her in her radiant days of happy love, was, nevertheless, such as to inspire great admiration for the sagacity of aunt Sarah.

From the moment that the idea of her murdered husband had ceased to be so completely an *idée fixe* as to exclude every other from her mind, her condition very perceptibly improved.

No sooner had aunt Sarah's well-imagined device recalled her to the feelings which, under ordinary circumstances, were decidedly

the most predominant in her nature, than her mind recovered a more healthy action. When thus led to believe that the life of her child had been in danger, while she was dwelling solely upon what she called her "selfish sorrow," the state of her mind underwent as sudden a change as if the effect had been produced by electricity.

She did not forget the dearly-loved husband she had lost, nor the terrible manner (even without knowing the worst) in which she thought he had been taken from her; but rarely did she now yield herself to the sort of gloomy despair with which this subject inspired her, without struggling against it, as against a crime committed against the child he had left her.

Under the influence of this feeling, no day now passed without bringing her moments which she might still have thought it a sin to call pleasurable, but which, nevertheless, possessed some of the best materials for happiness.

The loving and watchful friends who surrounded her, had now learned to understand

all this as well as aunt Sarah herself; and when Lady Amelia first touched upon the subject of their approaching departure from Paris, it was preceded by a judicious hint that though Paris was a very healthy city when compared to the majority of other cities, it nevertheless was very doubtful whether the air of any city in the world could be as good for young children as the air of the country.

This was quite enough to inspire the young mother with an almost feverish wish to get out of reach of all the city atmospheres in the world.

It would be needless to detail all the preliminary steps which, of necessity, preceded the execution of the scheme which the wishes and the wisdom of Clara had sketched out as the best they could adopt under their present greatly altered circumstances. Everything indeed seemed to make their removal desirable, and nothing occurred to impede it.

I must have greatly failed in giving a just description of the attachment which subsisted between my heroine and her schoolmaster, if any doubt can exist respecting the feelings

with which her proposal of coming to him was received.

She told him that her first project had been to propose his receiving aunt Sarah and herself as inmates, in the place of the niece he had lost; and in stating this, she said so very little concerning the loss of her fortune, and that little was so very vague, that the old gentleman was completely mystified.

He knew and understood so little concerning large commercial concerns, that he imagined some heavy claim must have been unexpectedly brought forward upon the property of the defunct corn-factor; and having no very satisfactory means of obtaining light upon the subject, he wisely determined not to torment himself by seeking for explanations, which he should probably not comprehend, if he obtained them.

It was quite enough for him to know that Clara found nothing lamentable in her present condition; and it was therefore with a degree of happiness that is not often felt by persons of his advanced age, that he replied to her letter by sketching out a plan which would

prevent the necessity of her separating herself from friends who had been so essentially useful to her, and to whom she had become so sincerely attached.

"Come, all of you, to my spacious mansion, my dearest Clara! Come, all of you, if only for a few weeks, while your friends can become sufficiently acquainted with our beautiful country to judge for themselves whether it is likely they should find more beauty or better accommodation elsewhere."

It was thus his gaily-written letter began; and then followed a full description, probably by the help of his very accurate niece, of the mansion, which very decidedly made it evident that they might all be accommodated in it without inconvenience of any kind.

The business which was necessarily to be transacted before leaving Paris occupied nearly a month; but it was concluded at last very much to their satisfaction; for the sum realized by the sale of the many well-chosen and really valuable articles with which Clara had decorated their abode, together with the tole-

rably large balance of ready-money at her bankers, enabled her to set forth upon what she liked to call her journey *home*, without her feeling any inconvenience from the accident of having ceased to be an heiress.

CHAPTER XII.

I WILL spare my readers all description of the truly happy meeting between my heroine and her schoolmaster Their pleasure at thus finding themselves together again was not mutual, but equal, and moreover it was mutually and equally understood by both.

The reception given by the warm-hearted old man to the friends whose affection and kindness had been so important to his dearly-loved pupil, was such as to make even poor Annie feel cheered and soothed by it; while the eagerly-expressed admiration of Mary Craddock for her very pretty and engaging child, at once laid a very promising foundation of friendship between them.

Considering the very strong contrast between the venerable rector and his guest, Lady Amelia, as far at least as related to their respective antecedents, this first meeting between them was at once more cordially friendly in its tone than either of them had ventured to anticipate

But every looker-on upon the world of as long standing as myself, must be aware that it is *not* the knowledge of any foregone difference of position between the parties, which is the cause most likely to keep asunder persons thus accidentally brought into contact.

Obvious, and obtrusively disagreeable qualities, will, of course, produce this; but when such do not apparently exist, it is the *want* of a *polished*, or, more properly speaking, a *correct* phraseology, which will be the MOST sure of producing this repulsive effect. It is a positive fact, that the *very slightest* defect in pronunciation or accent, will *do more* in the way of repulsion, than (Heaven forgive us!) the reputation of half the sins in the decalogue

A multitude of causes, made sufficiently obvious by the preceding narrative, had led

Lady Amelia to feel, that an individual so cordially esteemed and loved as the "schoolmaster" was by Clara, was not to be judged like an ordinary stranger, and she was fully prepared to treat him with careful observance and consideration; but most assuredly she did not expect that before she had been half an-hour in the old man's company, she should anticipate the most valuable species of companionship from his society.

That what is sometimes jocosely termed "*book learning*," does not form the best foundation for agreeable conversation, is, generally speaking, a perfectly just observation; but it is at least equally true, that a life-long habit of reading (unless the choice of books be very bad indeed) does produce a beneficial effect on the *language* of the reader, as well as on his intelligence; and the effect of this in the case of Lady Amelia Wharton, was, that when writing to Sir William Lawrence on the interesting subject of her introduction at Crowton Rectory, she said, — "As to the venerable rector, I decidedly think he is one of the most perfectly gentlemanlike

men I have ever been introduced to in my life."

Clara had by this time learned to know her noble friend pretty thoroughly, but not even her acuteness would have enabled her to understand the full *value* of this phrase from her so well as her uncle did.

That this result of the silent influence of that higher species of refinement which does not manifest itself by any outward demonstration of superiority, should have great effect in forming Lady Amelia's estimate of the advantages of their present residence, was equally natural and reasonable.

As long as her Annie had been Annie Wharton, the keeping her as much in that station of society to which her birth gave her a right to belong, as her very restricted income would permit, had certainly been a very prominent object with Lady Amelia; but her ideas on the subject were totally (and very rationally) different now.

The moderate independence which had been so fortunately secured to the young widow and her child, seemed to point out the quiet

manner of life which would be in all ways most desirable for them, and long before Clara had ventured to indulge herself by sketching any rustic plans for the future, which might include her old friend and her new ones, Lady Amelia had very quietly made up her mind to "fly the rank city" for ever, and devote herself to a country life with her widowed Annie and her precious child.

It was not very long, however, before this extremely rational scheme was disclosed to Clara, whose cordial approbation of it might easily enough be anticipated

Could aunt Sarah have arranged all the particulars of the plan to be adopted, the rectory house would have become the home of the whole party, and the kind-hearted rector would certainly have made no objection to it; but both Lady Amelia and Clara voted against it, one reason among others being that the advanced age of the dearly-loved schoolmaster would not permit the widowed mother and daughter to prepare themselves so completely for a permanent home as they wished to do.

But fortunately there was no difficulty in

finding a residence which appeared to suit them in every respect; one very essential recommendation having been pointed out to poor Annie by aunt Sarah, who, notwithstanding her spinster ignorance on such points, ventured to declare that she did not think any place in the whole world could be more admirably calculated to insure the health and safety of a young child; for the air was delicious, and the delightful garden of the proposed dwelling as safe as it was beautiful.

In short, the whole party of Gloucestershire emigrants might have said, without any intention of making a pious quotation, "Whatever is, is right."

Of course it took a few months to settle them all down in their respective places; but, during this interval, if such it might be called, they each and all made very considerable progress towards an intimate intercourse with their many agreeable neighbours.

If all the philosophy and all the science within the reach of man or woman either had been put in requisition to alleviate the mental miseries of poor Annie, the result could not

have been so satisfactory as that produced by the total and complete novelty of every object around her.

All that by remaining the same became more precious, as her child, her mother, aunt Sarah, and the ever-sympathising Clara did remain the same, save and except that they all became more dear; while every other feature of her existence was so completely changed, that every moment as it passed seemed to produce a new impression, instead of leaving her any leisure to meditate in gloomy recollection on all that had passed away from her for ever.

Meanwhile, Clara too, notwithstanding her active assistance in arranging the domestic comforts of her friends in their new home, had leisure to discover that she was surrounded with very agreeable neighbours. Mrs. Craddock (her schoolmaster's *ci-devant* Mary) she had hitherto known so little, personally, that had she met her in the gardens of the Tuilleries, she would certainly have passed her without being aware that she had ever seen her before; but now it required but a few

weeks of neighbourly intercourse to convince Clara that she might claim kindred with her uncle by a more valuable tie than that of mere relationship.

Mrs. Craddock was, in truth, a very well-read, intelligent young woman, extremely agreeable in person, and amiable in manner; and that her dwelling should be within half-an-hour's walk of the rectory, was not the least agreeable feature of my heroine's new residence.

Nor was the vicinity of Mr. Clarkson's residence a matter of indifference; and less still was it a matter of regret to Clara.

Her loving schoolmaster knew the character of his pupil better, for many reasons, than most schoolmasters could have done; but there was one point, at least, whereon he did not perfectly comprehend her. He was very far, in short, from knowing, feeling, or guessing, how completely Clara had taught herself to consider the conduct of Henry Octavius Hamilton as being truly the result of a conscientious feeling of duty.

That the principle, or the prejudice, upon

which he had acted, had been generated by feelings beyond her power of appreciation, only tended to render her acquittal of him more complete.

"I have no right to condemn the conduct of a man whose motives of action are such as I have no power of appreciating. I have the power, inherent in us all, of perceiving that he liked—nay, that he loved me; and his not yielding to this feeling because he believed it would be wrong to do so, can never be felt by me as a cause of anger." Such was the unvarying sentence which her judgment passed upon his conduct; and it may be that the universal and desperately vulgar homage which she was often aware her wealth brought her from many quarters, led her to look with more indulgence upon the contrary feeling, notwithstanding all the suffering it had caused her.

Be this as it may, the fact certainly was that she felt more inclined to meet Mr. Clarkson than to avoid him; and, as it would really in that very sociable little neighbourhood have been very difficult to shun him, and very par-

ticularly easy to do the reverse, Mr. Clarkson was soon enrolled amongst Miss Holmwood's most intimate new acquaintance.

No well-bred and honourable man, under the circumstances, would have wished to awaken in the mind of this decidedly ill-used young lady any recollections connected with what had passed between her and Henry Hamilton.

Mr. Clarkson was pre-eminently *both*, and he would willingly have submitted himself to very considerable inconvenience, in preference to recalling his wrong-reasoning friend to her mind.

Yet, nevertheless, he was perpetually, though unconsciously doing this.

The impression left on the memory of his *ci-devant* tutor, by all that Henry had said concerning Clara, only amounted to the belief that though he had certainly liked and admired her greatly, the sentiment she had inspired had not enough of the quality of love in it to conquer the proud repugnance he had felt at the idea of owing his future position in life to the trade-acquired wealth of a city wife.

But this solution of the mystery ceased to satisfy Mr. Clarkson, after he had reached some degree of conversational intimacy with Clara.

He thought her very handsome, but he had seen other women that appeared to him equally so, but either he had been out of luck as to the mental perfections of the fair creatures whose beauty he compared to her's; or the old schoolmaster's pupil really had more of intellectual development and genuine talent than the Oxford tutor had been accustomed to meet with among the ladies of his acquaintance.

It was certainly very far from his intention, or wish, that Clara should become aware of the sort of curiosity and interest with which he listened to her, and studied her character. But she did not either overlook or misunderstand it.

His very intelligent countenance expressed a degree of interest while listening to her on any subject, calculated to draw forth her opinions, principles, and feelings, which very speedily suggested to her the truth. Had he

been falling in love with her himself, this might have accounted for the particularly attentive interest with which he listened to her; but she was not likely to mistake him on this point, neither did she.

No; Clara made no mistake about it. She felt quite sure that Mr. Clarkson had been made acquainted with all that had passed between his *ci-devant* pupil and herself, and that his mind was often occupied by passing judgment on them both.

So far her discernment served her well and faithfully, but there it stopped short, for she could go no farther, nor in any way satisfy her mind as to which he thought most right, and which most wrong, in what had passed between them.

At length, however, a trifling circumstance occurred, which just served to convince her that Mr. Clarkson had himself made up his mind on the subject, and that he did not think what had passed between them was of too idle and unimportant a character to be remembered; but, although fully persuaded that she was right so far, she was, greatly to

her annoyance, quite unable to go any farther; that is to say, that she could not discover by any of the very delicate little trials which suggested themselves to her imagination, whether her very agreeable new acquaintance considered her to have been the individual the most to blame in the affair, or whether he threw the *onus* of the very strange catastrophe on his former pupil. Yet, nevertheless, though she had often told herself, and with very perfect sincerity of feeling, that she had done very wrong in urging her old friend to undertake a commission which he so evidently disapproved, she could not even now keep her mind quite free from the impression, that Mr. Clarkson comprehended her motives and feelings better than her schoolmaster had done, and the only symptom of remaining weakness of which she had been conscious, from the time she received Henry Hamilton's terrible message up to the present hour, arose from the glow which she felt both at her heart, and on her cheek, as she meditated on the unmistakable tone of respect and esteem with which she found herself treated by the con-

fidential friend of the man concerning whose feelings towards herself she had blundered so lamentably.

Meanwhile, her disclosures to her schoolmaster respecting the state of her fortune, or rather, concerning the loss of it, were at an immeasurable distance in point of explicit clearness, to those which she had formerly made to him respecting the state of her heart. Improbable as it may appear, my heroine felt no emotion at all approaching to unhappiness on the subject of her lost fortune.

Such very sincere indifference on such a subject would probably be unnatural, not to say impossible, to any one who had *not* suffered as my unlucky Clara had done, from the possession of wealth; neither would she possibly have felt it herself, had she really been left destitute.

But had not aunt Sarah the undoubted possession and disposal of ten thousand pounds? and did not Clara know that she could never feel any real wants which that sum could supply? Her communication, therefore, to her schoolmaster respecting the loss of all her

enormous wealth was accordingly made in a tone not at all more deplorable than might have marked her mention of the loss of a trinket, for which she had never felt any very great value.

Nor was his reception of these awful tidings at all more in accordance with the ordinary feelings of gentlemen and ladies on similar subjects. Like herself, he had never been pained, never severely inconvenienced, by the want of money; like herself, he had never felt pain from the gripe of positive poverty. Her very remarkable *un*clear explanation, therefore, of the really severe misfortune which had befallen her, was listened to, precisely in the manner she would have wished it to be, had she ever meditated sufficiently on the subject to form any definite wish about it.

The good man evidently agreed with her perfectly, in thinking that aunt Sarah's income would be quite enough for them both; and having very cheerfully expressed this opinion, the conversation glided away from money matters, by such gentle degrees, that they neither of them knew how, till they

found themselves in full discussion of the mind, manners, and character of *Mr. Clarkson*.

And here, too, they agreed perfectly; both being of opinion, that if there were a larger sprinkling of *Clarksons* through the world, with equal extent of information, depth, and clearness of thought, and untarnished purity of moral feeling, the enjoyments of the higher classes of society would cease to be as dependent on their external decorations of all kinds, as they appear to be at present. But on this point, it is possible that they were mistaken; for their means of judging the question were very limited

CHAPTER XIII.

THREE months of great tranquillity, and, in many respects, of great enjoyment also, had passed over the pleasant knot of neighbours and friends, which accident had thus thrown within such easy reach of each other, when Lady Amelia was greatly pleased, though somewhat startled also, by the sudden and perfectly unexpected arrival of her uncle, Sir William Lawrence, at their very pretty and very comfortable abode.

The first hours they passed together might be said to be almost wholly devoted to displaying the beauty and accomplishments of the little Clara; for so only, as Lady Amelia

well knew, could poor Annie have been kept from dwelling sadly on the past, instead of hopefully on the future; nor was it till the doting young mother had retired to superintend the *couchée* of her little idol, that the worthy baronet and his niece found any opportunity of discussing the terrible events which had occurred since they had parted.

Circumstances, as we have seen, had been so favourable to the restoration of tranquillity to the long-harassed Lady Amelia, that the task of Sir William in conversing with her on the terrible events which had occurred since their parting, was infinitely less painful than he had anticipated.

He had been suffering much, poor gentleman, from the severity of his own self-reproaches, in having introduced such a man as Monsieur Roche had proved himself to be, to the too-generous and confiding Miss Holmwood; and great indeed was his satisfaction, at being assured by his niece that the happiness of Clara was quite unscathed by the pecuniary loss which had been its consequence.

"I really believe that the consciousness of her great wealth tormented her," said Lady Amelia, with very perfect sincerity, and with very correct judgment also; "for I have never seen her so constantly cheerful, and apparently so truly happy, as she is at present."

"And does she never break out into expressions of indignation against that villain Roche?" said Sir William, earnestly.

"NEVER," replied his niece; "I have never heard her allude to the transaction by which this tremendous robbery was effected but once; and then she told me that her own carelessness was fully as much the cause of the disaster, as M. Roche's roguery. And therefore," she added, in a manner which left no doubt of her perfect sincerity, "you will really do me a great kindness if you will for evermore avoid all allusion to the subject.

"That my dear, generous friend, Clara, was not only sincere, but correct, in forming this opinion of the transaction, I feel very greatly persuaded," added Lady Amelia, "not only because no other mode of accounting for the manner of it has ever transpired, but because

I have never known Clara falsify any fact that she stated."

"That girl, Lady Amelia Wharton, is about the finest specimen of a human being that I have ever happened to meet with in the course of my pretty tolerably long life," replied the worthy baronet, whose temperament enabled him, perhaps, to judge more justly of what was generous, than of what was wise; and had he happened to be some thirty or forty years younger, it is probable that his exalted admiration of my heroine might have led him to the egregious blunder of leading him to propose himself to her as her future *lord and master*

But, as it was, his enthusiasm only displayed itself in speaking of her, whenever he could find or make an opportunity, as decidedly the very noblest-minded woman that ever walked the earth.

Being thus comfortably set at ease on the subject of Clara's ruin, which had, in truth, very severely tormented him, the excellent old man permitted himself to be extremely happy in the new circle of pleasant people among whom he was thrown.

He had liked Paris, because the people had been friendly and easy in their intercourse with him; and as Lady Amelia's new neighbours were friendly and easy in their intercourse also, he liked them too.

And most assuredly they liked him in return, as, to say the truth, it was very difficult not to do, save and except for that very superior class of persons who find no attraction in kindness of heart and sweetness of temper.

He sometimes, indeed, confessed to Lady Amelia, that he thought oftener of his poor, dear Victor than was wise, or in any way right; because their first duty at present was to soothe the mind of their precious Annie, by leading her to think as much as possible of her child, and as little as possible of its father.

"The heart has its philosophy as well as the head," thought Clara, as she listened to him; and it was by this species of philosophy, brought into very careful and constant practice, that the still childlike mother was led to feel that she still possessed something worth living for.

But among all his agreeable new acquaintance there was not one whom Sir William Lawrence liked quite as well as he did Mr. Clarkson. Yet it might not have been very easy, perhaps, to have found any who differed on most points more essentially from himself.

Clarkson had all his life been a deeply studious man. Sir William was almost, though not quite, ignorant of what the *precise* meaning of this phrase might be. Some horse-jockies were, he well knew, very studious; and so were many whist players; but, nevertheless, he had a sort of vague notion that it was the writing and the reading of books which pre-eminently entitled men to this occult species of reputation.

However, as he told his niece, he never troubled himself with what did not concern him. "When a man, or a woman either, is good humoured and sociable with me, I always like them—that is, provided their manner has nothing vulgar in it, you know; but that is a mere matter of habit, I take it." Such were the words in which he endeavoured to explain

to her *why* it was that he so very particularly liked Mr. Clarkson, although he had the alarming reputation of being so very clever.

And why was it that Mr. Clarkson so evidently found attraction in the society of Sir William Lawrence? The cause of this was decidedly more special than any which can be assigned for the partiality of the baronet for him; for it rarely happens that a gentlemanlike and cheerful-mannered individual fails to be received with an agreeable greeting from those he meets (unless there be some special reason for the contrary); whereas such men as Clarkson, under a very quiet and unassuming demeanour, are often found rather fastidious in their judgment of the companionable qualities of those they meet.

But it was otherwise in the present instance. Sir William Lawrence had at this time but one subject on which both his thoughts and words seemed to dwell with complete satisfaction; and this subject was CLARA, her qualities and her conduct.

It is more than probable that he had never before, during the whole course of his long life,

suffered so much annoyance from money matters, as he had done about the affairs of his dearly-beloved Victor. The getting him admitted to the dignity of a partnership in the much-vaunted concern which had ended so miserably, had given him more anxiety than all the *monetary* transactions of his whole existence put together.

His conscience told him, poor gentleman! that his great-niece would never have made so unsuitable a marriage, had he not himself introduced to her the very agreeable, but nearly penniless young man, with a degree of partial patronage, that he now felt had been exceedingly indiscreet.

Clara's generous interference had, in a great degree, removed the only objection he had ever seen to a connexion which was, in all other respects, most gratifying to his feelings; for he had really loved the youth very nearly as if he had been his son; and for this generosity on her part, he felt an almost unbounded degree of gratitude and admiration.

And then followed the other act on her part, that had so soothed the pride which had

been wounded by the casual allusions to the young man's position as *clerk* in the concern.

But great, indeed—greater than any one gave him credit for feeling—was the sorrow and repentance which came upon him, on hearing that his intimate and admired friend, M. Roche, had basely contrived to defraud the generous and confiding heiress of her noble fortune.

Sir William Lawrence was a warm-hearted and affectionate old man, and loved his nieces, both mother and daughter, most sincerely; yet it was not without a severe struggle in his mind, between right and wrong, that he finally determined upon the expedition which had now brought him into Gloucestershire.

He shrunk, poor man! from the idea of meeting Clara after the misfortune which HE and HIS had brought upon her; and, to his honour be it said, nothing but his feeling that it was his duty, would have induced him to brave the painful meeting which he anticipated.

Her first reception of him was certainly a very great relief to his spirits; for it was, to

the very full, as cordially kind as ever; but this, he thought, was the result of a great and very generous effort on her part to conceal the painful feelings and terrible recollections which the sight of him must occasion. But when he discovered, as he very speedily did, without any possibility of blundering, that so far from resenting his share in the mischief which had befallen her, she would not listen for a moment to his self-accusations, but most positively affirmed that, setting Monsieur Roche himself aside, there was nobody who could be blamed but herself; when he discovered that this was her *real* feeling, his relief from the conviction was only to be equalled by the admiration which this generous mode of viewing the question inspired.

Moreover, there was so much genuine indifference, such perfect unmistakable ease of heart displayed in Clara's manner of treating the whole affair, that his whole heart and soul seemed filled with love and admiration for her

And *this it was* which rendered the conversation of the old gentleman so peculiarly interesting to Mr. Clarkson.

Had he been a marrying sort of man, or even one of those who were subject to the malady of falling in love, the symptoms exhibited by Mr. Clarkson might easily have been comprehended and explained. But Mr. Clarkson was neither falling in love, nor likely to do so yet. Nevertheless it is a positive fact, that he assiduously sought the society of Sir William Lawrence, for the express purpose of hearing him talk of Clara Holmwood.

That this subject of conversation was not, however, one of mere passing curiosity, was made evident by his ensconcing himself one morning in Lady Amelia's morning sitting-room, while forsaken by the three generations of females by whom it was usually occupied, and inditing the following letter to his dear Hamilton.

"Where are you? and what are you doing? I shall direct my letter according to order, definitively given, but by no means definitively understood; for you have left me in doubt as to whether you are likely to be personally at the place indicated, or whether it

be not merely a sort of *pied à terra* address, where letters would have a fair chance of meeting you, some day or other.

"No man, I believe, gives up a college life for the sake of something more than an equivalent pecuniary advantage, without feeling, that whatever he may have gained, he has lost a good deal. A regularly bookish college life, when you have fairly *niched* yourself into it, has many snug attractions for a middle-aged bachelor like myself; and I certainly have felt, even while very cordially approving my parsonage house, and its flowery garden, that academic shades and snug rooms were very nearly as agreeable; while easy access to the companionship of *mind*, whether in face of book shelves, or of a well-filled arm chair, was very considerably within more *easy* reach of the college fellow, than of the resident rector.

"All this I have felt, my dear Hamilton, since I first took up my residence here; but I think I may honestly say, that I have ceased to feel it now.

"I have several very valuable, because really intelligent and friendly neighbours, nor

do I find myself much at a loss for books. There is a book society among us, which is well supported and well managed, so that we are very seldom doomed, for above a month or two, to pine in ignorance when any work pre-eminently demanding attention, is making the London Welkin ring with its renown.

"There is one old rector here, within a short distance of me, who has not only the best living and the best house in the neighbourhood, but who possesses by far the best library also.

"He is a bachelor too, as well as myself, and though there is about thirty years difference in our ages, there is very excellent sympathy between us. I believe him to be a very good man, as well as a very learned one, and I find him a kind and courteous neighbour, as well as a most agreeable companion.

"But now, my dear Hamilton, if I go on, and continue with equally unvarnished truth to tell you *who*, and *what* it is which has not only reconciled me to this great change in my mode of life, but made me feel more than I ever did before, that a human being *may* be a

very noble creature indeed; if I go on, and tell you all this, the chances are, I should think, about a hundred to one in favour of your utterly misunderstanding my real feelings, and coming to a conclusion respecting them as much at variance from the truth, as light is to darkness.

"Nevertheless I *will* go on; one reason for my doing so, being, that you are, or have been, too much accustomed to blundering in judgment (I pray you to forgive your old tutor's sincerity), to make one additional mistake a matter of much consequence.

"Now then, my preface being as full and satisfactory as it is in my power to make it, I will proceed to tell you that it is a young and very beautiful woman who has produced this effect. It would be difficult, I think, to take any class of men, considered merely as a class, without reference to individual varieties, who are less capable of forming a fair and accurate judgment of *women*, than the half-monastic residents of our universities.

"That I have been one of these, till within the last two years, is so strictly true, that

there is no way by which I can escape the imputation; and you must, therefore, receive all I may say, with the caution befitting a wise man, when listening to the statements of an ignorant one.

"Since my arrival here, I have become acquainted with a young lady, with whom you were formerly acquainted yourself, but of whom you had evidently formed (as the abrupt termination of your acquaintance very clearly proved) a different opinion from mine

"It is by no means necessary, however, that we should quarrel upon this point of difference, or even enter upon any discussion respecting the cause of it.

"Human beings would, on the whole, be considerably less amusing than they are, if there were no differences of opinion among them. Your old, and my new acquaintance, has not changed her name since you knew her—she is Clara Holmwood still.

"I remember your telling me that you thought her very lovely, so I suppose no very important change has taken place in her appearance since you parted, for she certainly is

very lovely still. But in other respects, I cannot but presume that there must have been some very remarkable alteration in her, for it seems to me to be utterly beyond the reach of belief, that you preferred setting off in the hope of obtaining the appointment of schoolmaster, or something of that kind in Australia, in order to avoid the risk of being tempted to become her husband.

"But no more of this. I really have not sat down, my dear Hamilton, for the purpose of scolding you for not falling in love with Miss Holmwood; though I may feel a good deal puzzled to comprehend how you contrived to avoid it. Neither do I mean to say anything rude, though I suppose it will seem somewhat like it, if I tell you that I really doubt your power of appreciating this very extraordinary young lady; but in saying this to you, I am quite ready to confess, that I doubt my own power of doing her justice, almost as much as I do yours; for most assuredly I should not have done so, had I been left with nothing but my own powers of observation and conception of character to trust to.

"This might, and certainly must, have sufficed to convince me that the young lady in question was highly intelligent; singularly well educated; with manners captivating, both by their unaffected simplicity, and their polished elegance.

"So far I might have been able to pass judgment on her without any great risk of blundering; but it required the statements of a perfectly competent, and perfectly trust-worthy witness, to enable me to form a just idea of what her conduct has been under circumstances which have put her very severely to the proof.

"This witness I have found in the person of an old baronet, who is the uncle of Lady Amelia Wharton, the friend with whom Miss Holmwood has been domesticated, and with whom, if I mistake not, she has conjointly kept house in Paris during the year or two which has elapsed since she became of age.

"Now this old baronet . . . by name Sir William Lawrence, is himself a speciality, and by no means undeserving of the sort of examination which an old naturalist like myself

is apt to bestow on all such human beings as they are happy enough to find a little removed from the beaten path of ordinary existence.

"This old baronet stands booked as having attained the ripe age of sixty-eight years; yet nevertheless he has a freshness of heart about him, which still renders him a very interesting study. He is a bachelor, and has remained so, I believe, solely from the dread of encumbering himself with expenses and responsibilities, which it would have been a *bore* to him to have struggled with or attended to.

"If I do not mistake the old gentleman, he is one of those who might have been tempted (God forgive him!) to have uttered a cordial amen to the dictum, that 'it is better to be d—d than bored.'

"But should he ever be proved guilty of having so transgressed, it may, I believe, be pleaded in his excuse that he has a far more abiding faith in the ultimate happiness of the animal called man, than in his eternal punishment.

"But be this as it may, Sir William Lawrence is the individual from whom I

have received the particulars which have enabled me to pass judgment on Miss Holmwood, and to consider her as being one of the very noblest specimens of human nature which has ever been brought within the sphere of my immediate observation. But, according to the ordinary distribution of good and evil, this singular girl has *not* been fortunate in her destiny.

"You, Hamilton, know certainly, quite as well as I do, the result of the first, and, as I believe, the only *love* attachment which she has ever formed. By what I can gather from my cross-examinations of my near old friend, her schoolmaster, she must have received sundry proposals of marriage; but, to use the old gentleman's own phrase, she declined them, one after another, with no more fuss than as if they had been so many invitations to dinner, which she did not feel inclined to accept.

"However, I understand that all these affairs are arranged in France by the assistance of deputies and friends; so that a beautiful and rich young lady may refuse a dozen offers of

marriage without the trouble of listening to any solicitations whatever.

"All this, my dear Hamilton, must, of course, appear to you not only perfectly natural, but inevitable; neither do I found my admiration upon her dignified preference of a single life, after the lamentable adventure which had occurred to her.

"So let us turn over this page of her history as a mere matter of course, not worth recording. But now I come to a much less ordinary adventure.

"Lady Amelia Wharton, the niece of my old friend, Sir William Lawrence, is a widow, but slenderly provided for, and is the mother of an only child, a young and very pretty daughter.

"It is very evident that this only daughter not only is, but always has been, the pet and the darling of every one who came near her, and of my bright wonder, Clara Holmwood, among the rest.

"But, very unfortunately as it turned out, this pretty Annie Wharton was not the only pet and darling of the party. Sir William

Lawrence had, in some way or other, become intimately acquainted with a highly-gifted youth, Victor Dormont by name, for some years, before his niece, the Lady Amelia Wharton, had established her residence in Paris.

"But no sooner, as I understand, was her establishment *monté* in partnership with her friend, Miss Holmwood, than this fascinating young Victor Dormont, under the almost paternal patronage of Sir William Lawrence, became established as a constant, almost as a daily guest at their mansion. This was doubtless a very obvious, and, I think, a very blameable imprudence; but the excuse made, both for the mother and uncle, by my friend, Miss Holmwood, in discussing it, was, that, both in appearance and manner, this unfortunate Annie Wharton was so nearly a child, that the mischief which soon followed was never thought of by any one, till it was too late to avoid it.

"But childhood in a female often takes wing very suddenly, I believe, under precisely such circumstances as those in which this unlucky little beauty was placed.

"In short, the boy and girl waltzed together, and sang together, and read together, till it was somewhat suddenly discovered that they were too vehemently in love with each other for any hope of happiness to be left them, unless they could be permitted to marry.

"Money there was none on either side, and woe unspeakable was the order of the day.

"Up to this point the narrative and statements of my new friend, Sir William, were perfectly clear and easily understood; but for what follows, you must be contented to receive results and not particulars, for it is very evident that my excellent Sir William understands very little about the circumstances of the affair, though his head and heart are both full enough of love and admiration for the noble qualities which have been made manifest in the course of it.

"This Victor Dormont, it seems, had been admitted, as a marked and very flattering personal favour to Sir William Lawrence, as a confidential clerk, at a high salary, to a large and highly vaunted mining company, said to be by

far the most flourishing of any French speculation of the day.

"But although it was the friendship and interest of Sir William Lawrence which was stated to be the source of this much-desired appointment, the highly-favoured Victor Dormont had another very partial friend, who, luckily as it seemed for him, was one of the most influential and important members of this great concern.

"The name of this individual is *Roche*, and he was considered, they say, as one of the most prosperous and enlightened commercial individuals in France.

"It was through the introduction of this M. Roche that Sir William Lawrence had first become acquainted with the fascinating young Dormont, and they seemed, by all accounts, to have vied with each other in making a sort of idol of him. My story is growing a very long one, but it is difficult to shorten it.

"This vastly imprudent marriage, as it seems to me to have been, notwithstanding all the petting and patronage bestowed on the young Victor, appeared to be approaching with

unchecked rapidity when the young lady's mother (the Lady Amelia Wharton) heard the epithet or title of CLERK bestowed upon her future son-in-law.

"It seems that she had presumed him to be a *partner* in this much-vaunted concern, and her dismay was great and very strongly expressed on discovering her mistake.

"I take it for granted that the pretty little bride-elect looked pale and woe-begone when her noble mother hinted that it would be better to wait till the young man had attained a higher position in the concern, for there seems to have been a hitch. Ten thousand pounds was the sum named, by which the youth might obtain the dignity of associate in this magnificent concern. But where was the source from whence this modest entrance fee was to come? Sir William Lawrence, as he very frankly assured me, had never in his life had the command of so large a sum of ready money, and Monsieur Roche, while he called all the gods to witness that his beloved Victor should instantly receive this assistance from him, had he the power to give it, confessed that he had

not, for that all the ready money that he had in the world was vested in his magnificent picture gallery in the Place Vendôme!

"Lady Amelia, I believe, then hinted at the necessity of delay, whereupon the pretty Annie looked consumptive, and Victor showed alarming symptoms of fever.

"Now for the rest it is a jumble, that I cannot pretend to make you comprehend, because I do not comprehend it myself. I only know that my adorable Clara was most earnest to smooth all difficulties by depositing the required money herself, which she might have done with no more inconvenience than you or I should feel in depositing five shillings; but here it seems the pride of the high-born Lady Amelia became exceedingly troublesome.

"Clara had already, as it seems, made a very noble bridal present to her pretty little friend, which had been very properly at once settled upon herself and her future offspring; and beyond this the high-minded Lady Amelia would not permit her to go, because it would have the appearance, as she said, of 'purchasing a husband for her daughter.'

"This refusal was not only steady, I think, but stubborn; and then came more consumptive looks.

"At this point it seems the circumstances of the case were communicated fully to Monsieur Roche, whereupon he begged Miss Holmwood to let him see her for five minutes, alone. The modest request was readily granted, and very little more than the stipulated time seems to have been required before Miss Holmwood was induced very carelessly, it must be confessed, to sign a paper which was rapidly and laughingly read to her, by which, as it seems, she pledged herself, or supposed she did so, to guarantee, if called upon, the sum of ten thousand pounds, as Victor Dormont's contribution to the capital of the concern, and by which he became a partner in it. Of this private arrangement very little, or in fact nothing, was said, in order that the too sensitive Lady Amelia Wharton might be spared the anxiety which might have been produced by her knowing that Clara had been again applied to for pecuniary assistance.

"And now the wedding took place, and, by

my good friend Sir William's description, they must have formed altogether as happy a family party as ever were seen.

"But alas! 'Malignant Fate sat by and smiled' the while. The magnificent mining concern turned out to be a most atrocious humbug; and although this fact was for a short time concealed from the ladies of the family, it was fully made known to them at last by a letter from the scoundrel Roche, found upon the dead body of the unfortunate, but perfectly innocent Victor, who had shot himself upon discovering that his benefactress, Miss Holmwood, had lent her name in order to secure his admission, and that she was totally ruined by the failure of the concern. But by far the most interesting part of the story consists in the fact, that this lowly-born Clara Holmwood has endured the total loss of her magnificent fortune, not only without repining, but without manifesting the slightest symptom of regret about it.

"Very fortunately she possesses the comfort of a very loving maiden aunt, who is possessed of a few hundreds per annum, which suffices

to maintain them, and this is evidently perfectly sufficient to reconcile the beautiful Clara to her loss.

"But one must hear Sir William Lawrence narrate all the details of these transactions, and then look at the lovely, placid,—nay, cheerful countenance of this extraordinary girl, in order to comprehend her truly sublime, yet truly simple character.

"Do not suppose, however, that I am plotting against your peace of mind, by endeavouring to awaken either your compassion or any other tender feeling towards her. It is, I assure you, my dear Hamilton, with equal sincerity and pleasure, that I take upon myself to assure you, that she requires neither the one nor the other. I really do not remember to have ever seen any one whom I believed to be so completely contented and happy as Clara Holmwood appears to be, surrounded, as she is, by highly-intelligent friends, and by hearts which understand her character, and love her as she deserves to be loved.

"Perfect as I feel her noble beauty to be, I positively forget it altogether when I am talking

to her, and neither see nor feel anything but the bright intellect, and the self-forgetting kindness which make her what she is.

* * * *

"In reading over my letter, my good friend, it strikes me, that there are two points on which it might lead you to draw very false conclusions, and therefore, notwithstanding its already unreasonable length, I must add a few words more, in order to guard you from such mischief. The first idea that suggests to me the possibility of your blundering upon a false conclusion is, that my letter may be mistaken for a very pathetic statement of misfortunes, which have befallen the heroine of my narrative. But, in believing this, you would, indeed, blunder *most* egregiously; for I am as certain that Miss Holmwood is happier now than she ever has been at any former period of her life, as I am that I have conversed with her.

"I wish to state this fact plainly and explicitly, my dear Hamilton, because I know you, notwithstanding some few educational errors and eccentricities, to be essentially amiable and

kind-hearted. And did my letter so mislead you as to make you fancy that Miss Holmwood was unhappy, it might cause you very serious uneasiness. But believe me when I assure you, that there is not the very slightest reason whatever that you should entertain any such idea, for *nothing*, in fact, could be more thoroughly and completely erroneous than such a belief.

"There is also another point respecting her, on which I think it right to speak explicitly, though rather for your sake than for hers; and that is, concerning the present state of this young lady's heart.

"Indeed, my dear Hamilton, I would not have written concerning her as I have now done, did I not feel very perfectly sure, that you have no reason whatever to reproach yourself (as far as she is concerned) by recalling what formerly passed between you. No victim of unhappy love ever looked as Clara Holmwood does now.

"I think it very likely that you may remember all that passed between us the last time we met before you set out upon your wild

wanderings, and that you may remember among the rest, that I did not treat you very gently when you related to me what had passed between this young lady and yourself, before you made your sudden escapade from Europe. I thought then, and I still think, that your conduct on that occasion was regulated by a train of reasoning so utterly fallacious as to approach, in my estimation, more nearly to a whim than a principle.

"But we ended, as you may also remember, by agreeing not to discuss the point, nor should I return to it now, but for the impossibility of keeping my promise of frequently writing to you, without your learning the names of my neighbours, especially of such among them as I am constantly in the habit of seeing.

"To name Miss Holmwood and Mr. Williamson to you, as being among these, and then to say no more about them, would show a degree of restraint on my part for which I see no occasion And in order to make you see this also, I deem it but right to both of you, to state my conviction, that whatever tender weakness my friend Clara may have betrayed

towards you a year or two ago, there is not the very slightest symptom of the existence of any such weakness at present.

"We have repeatedly conversed together respecting both you and the brother (your eldest brother, I believe), whom she was in the habit of seeing frequently at Dr Brixbourg's, and I venture to assure you, with a very perfect conviction of the correctness of my judgment on this point, that you did not succeed more completely in conquering your attachment to her, than she has done in conquering her attachment to you

"I absolve you, therefore, from all necessity of self-reproach on that score

"Had not the confidence between us concerning our love affairs been mutual, I might think it necessary to add a postscript, for the purpose of assuring you, that the very decided opinion which I have given respecting the state of this young lady's heart, does not arise from my being in danger of falling in love with her myself. My matrimonial engagement, which was so long cherished with very little hope to keep it alive, is now, thank Heaven! in a fair way of being accomplished (as soon, indeed,

as my parsonage-house is in a condition to receive my bride), has been long well known to you, and I may therefore speculate upon the character of this extraordinary girl, without any danger of being mistaken, either by you or myself.

"And it is for this reason, perhaps, that I have indulged myself so freely in analyzing a character which I certainly consider as being very greatly above the ordinary class of mortals, notwithstanding the well-established fact, that her father *was a corn-chandler!*

"And now, dear Hamilton, I will release you. My parsonage is growing very nice looking, if my partial eyes do not deceive me; but the smell of paint will, I fear, hang about it for some weeks longer. You have, as you well know, a general and unlimited invitation to it. If you wish to be *comfortable*, you had better not come till my Margaret is here to receive you; but you, nevertheless, might find a bed, with something intended to represent breakfast, dinner, and supper, if you arrived before.—Yours ever,

"J. Clarkson"

CHAPTER XIV.

It is very possible, that if the above letter had been submitted to the perusal of my heroine, together with an authentic assurance that it had safely reached, and (notwithstanding its enormous length) been more than once attentively perused also, by the individual to whom it was addressed, it certainly is very possible that Clara Holmwood might, in that case, have lost some portion of the philosophical tranquillity with which she had taught herself to meditate on the most remarkable events of her past life.

She was not, however, subjected to any such trying test, and therefore, without any

unseemly self-applause, she believed not boastingly, but thankfully, that she had been enabled to pass through sundry misfortunes with less permanent disturbance of her tranquillity than would have been the lot of many others.

As to the loss of her vast fortune, it was positively a relief to her, and she very sincerely felt that, either by accident, or some defect of judgment on her own part, the possession of it had very decidedly occasioned her more pain than pleasure. But as to the *great* misadventure of her life, by which, poor girl, she had celebrated her arrival at the age of discretion, she always felt, when meditating upon it, that she was not half as much ashamed of it as she ought to be; and for the various subsequent misadventures, by which she had so repeatedly failed of achieving the good she meditated, she accounted for them by arriving at the very sincere conviction, that it must all have arisen from some natural deficiency of judgment on such subjects, on her own part, which would probably have continued to mark her course of action on such points, had not

accident luckily deprived her of the power of any farther blundering.

As things had turned out, however, she really now was very happy.

Everything seemed to go well with those she loved. Even the poor bereaved Annie found so much of joy and hope, in the rapid progress of her beautiful child, that she had not leisure to mourn over the short-lived happiness which she had lost; and as to Lady Amelia, she frankly confessed to her friend Clara, that she never remembered to have been so perfectly at ease in mind before, or, in other words, so really happy as she was now.

Such being the condition of the principal personages of my tale, it might seem wise to close it here; but it may not be.

The tranquillity they were enjoying was doomed to be again interrupted, and my reader is respectfully intreated to accompany me for a short space farther, that I may have an opportunity of impressing upon him the important and recondite truth, that there is no condition which may be relied upon as certain under the sun.

There was, however, a short interval, during which my often-harassed Clara not only enjoyed very perfect tranquillity, but enjoyed also the extremely great pleasure of spending her days and hours exactly according to her own fancy; for rarely were people so strongly attached to each other, as were the inhabitants of Crowton Rectory and Crowton Cottage, who each and all retained the habit, as well as the power, of spending their hours so completely according to the individual whim and will of each, as did this knot of friends. Sometimes, indeed, one might have fancied, when within reach of contemplating a *tête-à-tête* between my heroine and her rector host, that the days of her early youth were come back again, and that he was her schoolmaster still.

Nor were the hours when such a thought might have been suggested, by any means the least delightful of her very happy existence. Her education had certainly been a very strange one, defective in many respects, as the patient reader must be fully aware, but yet more productive of high results, both

morally and intellectually, than more ordinary schooling would have been likely to produce.

But my Clara was still under five-and-twenty, and were I to dwell on the depth of erudition into which her insidious old schoolmaster often led her, when they were *shut up* together in his snug study, she would scarcely escape the imputation of being much better fitted to enact the character of schoolmaster herself, than that of heroine.

Fortunately, however, no such moody thoughts clouded the sunshine of her present existence. She was, indeed, *very* happy, one great reason for which was, that those she loved were evidently very happy too.

Lady Amelia honestly confessed to her, that this was the first period of her life in which she had felt herself perfectly free from pecuniary anxiety of any kind; and this is, of itself, though not a sublime source of felicity, a very convenient sort of shield against annoyance.

And even the greatly-sobered young Annie, though it was quite impossible that she should show herself, as yet, as the same laughter-loving being for which Nature seemed to

have intended her, was happily so completely occupied by her child, that it would have appeared to her both impious and unnatural, if she had wept when her beautiful little Clara smiled. And, in truth, she had herself ceased to weep, and being totally unconscious of the mental misery which her unfortunate husband had endured, she lived, and died, in happy ignorance of the terrible tragedy by which they had been separated.

As for the miniature little Clara herself, she really was very nearly all that her young mother fancied her to be; she was pretty, intelligent, sweet-tempered, and perfectly healthy; a state of things which Annie confessed could not possibly have been improved, if she had even been blessed with having a good fairy for a god-mother.

Aunt Sarah, meanwhile, enjoyed in very high perfection the greatest happiness of which her nature was susceptible; for she loved affectionately the friends among whom she lived, and was affectionately loved by them in return. Nay, it even began to appear, that Annie had not quite left off the playful tricks

which in Paris had made the great delight of aunt Sarah's existence; and poor Annie must be forgiven, if the pleasure of seeing her old friend laugh again, had apparently more effect than the more solemn reasonings of philosophy in restoring her playfulness.

And if, to complete my catalogue of well-pleased *dramatis personæ*, I turn to my heroine herself and her schoolmaster, I must declare, if I do them justice, that it would be difficult to find a happier set of people brought together in any quarter of the globe.

But the uncertain condition of human beings during the earthly portion of their career, is sufficiently familiar to us all, to prevent the rational reader from feeling any astonishment, on being told that this very comfortable order of things was not destined to last; and yet none of the persons concerned can be reasonably accused of any very blameable conduct in bringing about the destruction of it. Truly doth Shakespear say.

> "*Our fate, hid in an auger-hole,*
> *May rush, and seize us!*"

Who can stop it?—Who can prevent it? Assuredly not my unsuspicious heroine, whose will had no more to do in bringing about the events which awaited her, than that of her romping namesake, who had so completely tired her out, by insisting upon being caught in every out-of-the-way corner of her grandmamma's garden, that the old Clara fairly eloped, in order to get out of the way of the young one.

One of the very pleasant features of my heroine's present residence was its vicinity to that of Mrs. Craddock. The more Clara had seen of the newly-married niece of her schoolmaster, the more she liked her; and that this liking had reached a very high point, was sufficiently proved by her reply to a question from Lady Amelia, concerning her qualities and acquirements.

"Mrs. Craddock is, in my opinion," replied Clara, "exactly what a near relative of my schoolmaster ought to be."

"Which means, I suppose, that she is very good?" returned her ladyship, with a smile.

"Which means," added Clara, in an accent

which had nothing of jest in it, "that nature has endowed her with a powerful mind, a pure heart, a sweet temper, and fascinating manners."

"Clara! I shall be jealous," responded Lady Amelia.

"No, my dear friend, you will not be jealous," was Clara's reply; "but when you have seen a little more of her, I should not be surprised if you were to be tormented by the idea that I might probably become so."

It was to the house of this lady that my heroine directed her steps after playing, till she was tired, with her god-daughter.

The intimacy established between Mrs. Craddock and my heroine was sufficient to justify the entrance of the latter through the open window of the drawing-room, even though the said drawing-room appeared to be unoccupied.

But this little drawing-room opened upon a larger one at the back of the house, which, having a verandah towards the garden, was most frequently inhabited by Mrs. Craddock; and to this verandah Clara now directed her

steps, nothing doubting that she should find her friend in her accustomed place there.

In this expectation, however, she was disappointed; for Mrs. Craddock was not there.

Nevertheless, the verandah was not wholly unoccupied; for, on a garden chair, skilfully placed so as to command the prettiest spot in the premises, sat a gentleman, holding an open book in his hand, but certainly not profiting by its contents, or by the prettiness of the garden either; for he was very evidently entranced in that species of meditation which is usually denominated a brown study; and his eyes were very fixedly directed towards the ground.

The movements of Clara were generally of rather a tranquil character; and the step by which she was about to traverse the verandah was a very noiseless one, nevertheless it sufficed to make the meditative gentleman raise his eyes, and fix them on her face.

Their eyes met.

It would not be easy to say on which of the two faces the expression of strong emotion became most visible; but if equal

in strength, it was very different in character. The features of Clara spoke extreme astonishment; those of the individual she had thus disturbed, although he certainly did not look as if he had expected her, betokened a far stranger degree of agitation than any mere surprise could have occasioned.

There was, moreover, another marked difference in the effect produced upon them by this unexpected encounter, for the lady coloured very brightly; whereas the gentleman turned extremely pale.

It must be evident to any one who reads this statement, that the persons who now unexpectedly encountered each other had met before; and to my especial readers it will be equally clear that the gentleman was the Honourable Henry Octavius Hamilton, as that the lady was my heroine.

It is by no means certain whether the long letter from Mr. Clarkson to his *ci-devant* pupil, which was given in the last chapter, was written with any wish or intention of bringing about the present meeting, or whether it was not.

The probabilities are certainly in favour of the latter; for Mr. Clarkson was not at all a scheming man; and, moreover, notwithstanding the many years of cordial intimacy between the tutor and pupil, which had grown into a more familiar species of friendship than is often found between individuals who had stood in this relation to each other, Clarkson, if questioned on the subject, would have been very likely to declare that he did not think his friend, the Honourable Henry Octavius Hamilton, had been endowed by nature with an intellect and character of sufficient dignity and excellence to render him a fitting companion through life for Clara Holmwood.

But be this as it may, it is very certain that the aforesaid letter had brought about the present embarrassing meeting; for embarrassing it certainly was, both to the gentleman who had so boldly sought it, and to the lady who most assuredly had never felt the least inclination to seek it at all.

Whether it was caused by her lowly birth, or by the queer sort of education which she had received, I will not take upon me to say,

but, in fact, the young woman certainly had many peculiarities of character, which led her, as we have already seen to her cost, poor girl! to do many things which nobody else, perhaps, would ever have thought of doing; and her behaviour in her present very embarrassing position was decidedly a proof of great singularity.

Her complexion, as I have said, was changed from its usually rather delicate tint to a very brilliant crimson, as she became conscious that since she had last met the gentleman into whose presence she had thus unexpectedly entered, she had sent him a proposal of marriage, which he had taken the liberty of declining.

Now it can scarcely be doubted by any one that Clara must have often felt very deep regret for having done this; but it is by no means certain that this deep regret was the predominant feeling left upon her mind by this transaction.

She was quite aware that she had acted with very blameable precipitation, and, in short, that she had not acted *rightly* in sending

her schoolmaster to him, in the way she had done.

But although the consciousness of this blame on her part was impressed very deeply on her mind, it was not the part and portion of the adventure which had left the deepest impression on her spirit.

It is probable that her ideas of right and wrong in the transaction, and particularly in Henry Hamilton's part of it, might still be somewhat confused; and chiefly because, after a good deal of meditation on the subject, she had never been able to enlighten her judgment very satisfactorily as to the correctness and sound philosophy of the young man's principles of action. But the one point on which she was quite sure that she did *not* blunder, was, that he had done what he believed to be RIGHT, and this conviction had sufficed to save her from all the mortification which would have overwhelmed her, had she judged him more harshly.

Never, for a single moment, had the suspicion that she had mistaken his feelings towards her entered her head.

He had betrayed his love for her, because it had been too genuine to be concealed; but, in his own judgment, he would have acted unworthily had he yielded to it; and *therefore* he did not yield.

This belief in the righteousness of his motive, and in his high-principled devotion to what he believed to be the honour of his family, had been treasured in her memory much more carefully than the pang which his refusal had cost her; and it was therefore without a shadow of resentment that she now stepped forward, after the involuntary pause of a moment, and with a blushing, but very gentle smile, held out her hand to him, as to an old friend whom she was very glad to see.

Unless the reader should have the great good luck to become personally acquainted with the Honourable Henry Octavius Hamilton, and that, too, with sufficient intimacy to obtain from the young man himself some tolerably intelligible statement as to what his feelings were when he suddenly found himself thus face to face with the lovely being he had

so infamously treated, he will never be able to comprehend them.

She whose whole life and conduct had been so graphically detailed to him by his friend Clarkson, and who now smiled upon him like an angel, while she actually held out her hand to him in token of forgiveness!

That Clara should blunder, is not likely to be matter of surprise to the reader, for it is quite impossible to deny that she *was* rather apt to do so, but never did she blunder more egregiously than on the present occasion, when, from his turning so extremely pale, she fancied that he was painfully annoyed at thus suddenly seeing her, after what had passed between them.

And as she had quite made up her mind to think that, having acted upon *principle*, he had acted *rightly*, her courteous greeting was meant to prove to him that she had quite outlived her folly, and was perfectly aware, that in what had passed between them he had been quite right, and herself quite wrong.

And how did the unfortunate man receive her hand? Did he again beg leave to decline

it? Not quite so; but nevertheless, there seemed some danger that they should understand each other no better now than they had done when they were somewhat more than three years younger.

Whether Clara would have been likely to form a more accurate judgment as to what was passing in his heart had she happened to be aware of the contents of that extremely long letter which her new acquaintance, Mr. Clarkson, had written to him, may be doubtful; but as, in fact, she had not the very slightest idea of this, and probably thought it more likely than not, that he had never heard her name mentioned from the hour when he received her strange embassy to the present moment, the strong agitation expressed by his features when their eyes first met, was as little understood as even Clara herself could contrive to make it

But not even a lady as decidedly addicted to blundering as poor Clara—while on the sunny side of forty—could mistake what followed.

After one glance at the lovely eyes which, in

sober truth, he hardly dared to look at,—after one glance, Henry Hamilton threw himself on his knees before her.

And now, poor girl, it was her turn to be agitated. So stedfastly and so honestly had she reasoned herself into the conviction, that the conduct of Henry Hamilton had been the result of what he felt to be his duty, that no shadow of blame rested upon it, in her estimation. Not all the long meditations which she had very deliberately bestowed upon what had passed between them, had left any doubt upon her mind respecting the fact of his having loved her.

Perhaps there is a power in sympathy, which cannot be altogether conquered, and set at rest, by the force of reason, and it might be this power which had led her, very perseveringly, to believe, that it was no contemptible versatility of fancy which had led him to reject her offered hand, but a firm, unflinching principle of *duty*; and could she have recognized the same feeling as a cause for the act, she would have been as well disposed to have accorded equal absolution to a hand raised against her life.

As to the principle upon which this feeling of duty was founded, she comprehended it not. Moreover, she felt a conviction, which very honestly amounted to certainty, that she might waste hours in labouring to understand it, without succeeding.

If a difficulty of syntax came in her way, either in construing or composing, Clara was the most persevering of students, and would willingly have waited for her dinner, or her bed either, till the difficulty was conquered.

But though feeling most genuine respect for the reverence shown by the young nobleman for what he held to be a principle of duty, she felt conscious also, that she must subject her mind to a more difficult system of study than any with which her schoolmaster had as yet made her familiar, before she could bring herself to the comprehension of the theme proposed.

And to confess the truth, it was *not* very long before she arrived at the conviction, that *race* and *breeding* were really almost as necessary to human beings as to dogs, in the acquirement of noble principles of action; and

therefore it was, that after meditating very deliberately upon the subject during the long hours of one sleepless night, she came to the conclusion, that he was as perfectly right as she had been perfectly wrong; and after one rather heavy sigh of regret that she had not always and ever "left him alone in his glory," she became the contented, nay, the very happy Clara, that we have seen her through the last three years of her life.

But I am leaving Henry Hamilton too long upon his knees, at least as far as my duty as a narrator is concerned, though his friend Mr. Clarkson might be of opinion, that it was not very easy to make him kneel too long at the feet of Clara. But Clara herself was evidently of a different opinion; for though, as I have confessed already, it was now her turn to be agitated, she so earnestly entreated him,—so *very*, VERY earnestly entreated him to change his position, that although he scarcely seemed to know what he himself did, or what she was saying to him, he not only at length obeyed her, but gently placed her in a chair, and then, more resolutely, placed himself in another

beside her, as if feeling that the necessity of talking to her, and being listened to, was more than paramount to everything else, and must be achieved without an hour's delay, let her opposition to it be what it might. But just at that moment, it must be confessed, that my philosophic Clara was in no condition to oppose anything.

Where was all the high-minded indifference which she had been cherishing in her very heart of hearts for the last three years? Had she been cheating herself? Was she *not* indifferent — perfectly indifferent — as far as concerned the sayings and the doings of the Honourable Henry Octavius Hamilton?

She that was truth itself in all her dealings with man, woman, and child, was it possible that only where her own peace of mind was concerned,—only when what was done to herself was at stake, she could be false, treacherous, and inconsistent?

These questionings shot through her heart and head with a vehemence that very literally made her tremble. She had never been ashamed of herself till now. She *knew*—no

one knew better—all the blunders she had made; but from first to last, from the hour when she had forced her poor schoolmaster, *bon gré, mal gré*, to convey her extremely improper message to Henry Hamilton, to that in which she had signed something—she knew not what—for the especial pleasure of Monsieur Roche, she had never been heartily ashamed of herself, till now. OH! If any one had told her, that only because Henry Hamilton had fixed his eyes upon hers for about half a minute, she should therefore be sitting beside him, with her hand locked in his! If only one short half-hour before, her schoolmaster himself should have told her this . . . . how would she have received it?

Yet SO IT WAS! She knew it; she felt it; she was perfectly aware of the fact. Yet there she sat, without attempting to stir an inch, on, on, on, for Heaven only knows how long, ... for Mrs. Craddock had, in fact, set off with her husband, upon an expedition which would certainly detain them till dinner-time. There sat my heroine meanwhile, taking no note of time, and perfectly unconscious of the

impropriety of her own conduct, in thus taking possession of a respectable parsonage-house in the absence of its reverend proprietor and his wife, for the obvious purpose of being made love to, by a gentleman who had previously treated her with the most marked contempt!

If I were to write a dozen volumes, instead of three, in order to prove that the daughter of a corn-factor is not at all likely to behave like a real young lady, I could not demonstrate the fact more clearly than I have already done; and I must therefore hasten to recount the strange facts which followed, in order to release my reader with as little delay as possible from the perusal of a story so little accordant with propriety.

CHAPTER XV.

THERE were two facts very decidedly evident in the position of the Honourable Henry Octavius Hamilton at the period which I have chosen for again presenting him to my readers. With the first indeed they are already well acquainted; namely, that he had received a specific and unmistakeable proposal of marriage from the extremely beautiful young lady who now stood (almost as pale as her own white dress) before him, and that he had declined it.

But concerning the second, concerning the marvellous second, they are still in ignorance, as it has not yet been in my power distinctly

to inform him that he was now considerably more desirous of accepting her *ci-devant* offer of marriage, than he had ever been of refusing it.

Versatility of purpose is always productive of inconvenience to the individual who is subject to the weakness, and so it now proved to Henry Hamilton on the present occasion.

Few things in life, perhaps, are more agreeable than the confession of mutual attachment between a nymph and swain, against whose union no voice is likely to be raised. Yet here was an attachment, very decidedly belonging to this category, yet to the avowal of which there were difficulties almost insurmountable.

For how was it possible that the gentleman, having sent such a message to the lady as he had sent by her particularly trust-worthy schoolmaster, could now have the audacity to tell her that he now requested she would be so obliging as to marry him, with as little delay as possible?

Or how could the young lady, after having very distinctly received, and understood the

said message, avow to him in reply, that she was ready to accept his proposition with the greatest possible satisfaction ?

Yet all this had to be achieved before my story can be brought to a conclusion ; and, I am happy to say, that it was achieved with wonderfully little difficulty considering the circumstances, and so very completely to the satisfaction of both parties, that it would be difficult to say which of them (the very necessary ceremony of separation being at length accomplished) moved homeward on their solitary way in the most perfect state of felicity.

I am so perfectly aware that my heroine has been perpetually doing what she ought not to have done, that I cannot but feel the probability of her being suspected of some species of indiscretion now ; but really this was not the case. The most well-behaved and punctilious of my fair readers would, I am convinced, have acquitted her, on this occasion, at least, of anything and everything approaching to impropriety, could they have heard all that she had to listen to, before this important *tête-à-tête* reached its conclusion.

Nobody, in fact, but those who were as thoroughly well acquainted with the position and the character of his family as the young man himself, could have made it as clearly evident as he contrived to do, that no choice was left him, save that between personal misery and family disgrace.

"But how can family disgrace be avoided, if I were to become your wife, now?" demanded Clara, rather gravely.

"I almost despair of making you comprehend me, my sweet Clara, even if I were to enter upon the subject with all the careful precision of a professor, about to enlighten his auditors by a prefatory lecture on the nature of the science they wish to study."

"Perhaps," thought Clara, "the mysterious problem explanatory of the flow of aristocratic blood, may be in some degree analogous to the doctrines of electricity, only somewhat more difficult of comprehension;" but the thought discreetly retired within its secret cell, and all that reached her Henry's observation was a somewhat increased brightening of her beautiful eyes, as the merry mischief passed behind them.

It must not be supposed, however, that Henry Hamilton had meditated such an interview as the present, without being conscious that he must not come to it without being in some degree prepared for the explanation now hinted at.

Nor had he done so. Though the three years which had passed over him had taught him perhaps to think more deeply, and to separate truth from error more accurately than at the time of his important interview with Clara's schoolmaster, he had not so lost sight of the principles by which he had been then actuated, as to have *nothing* to say in reply to Clara's question.

Having therefore confessed with becoming modesty that he felt somewhat at a loss to explain the mystery of which she so frankly sought a solution, he added, "There are nevertheless some points in the difficult question you have asked me to solve, which may be answered, thank Heaven! with no great difficulty. Is it not true, loveliest and dearest—is it not true, that you are no longer in possession of the fortune which I felt to be so fatal an obstacle to our marriage?"

"It is quite true," replied Clara, laughing, "that I am no longer in possession of any fortune at all; but although I am bound to believe, because you state it as a fact, that you can love me without a fortune, though you could not love me with one—I am still as much as ever at a loss to understand why your family should sympathise with you in this strange preference."

"Will you consider the mystery less puzzling, if I tell you that their feelings on the subject were sure to have agreed with mine, on wishing you to become my wife, if they also had been rich, instead of unfortunately being very particularly the reverse?"

"I think," replied Clara, with a very lovely augmentation of colour; "I think, that if you made the statement, I should believe it, because I find it so strangely easy to believe you now, solely because you say you love me, although I have lived for three long years under the conviction (also from your own shewing) that you loved me not."

"Clara!" he exclaimed, suddenly starting from his chair, and standing directly before

her; "Clara! you are truth itself, and there is nothing that you could state to me respecting your own feelings which I should not believe, however improbable it might appear to me. Now then, tell me," and he ventured to take her hand as he spoke; "now then, tell me Clara! Did you ever, when meditating on the subject in silence, and alone; did you ever, in the inmost recesses of your heart, believe that I did not love you?"

The question startled her. She hastily withdrew her hand, and fixing her eyes very resolutely on the floor, remained silent.

"Do not mistake the question, Clara," he resumed. "Do not for an instant suppose that I have the audacity to ask whether you then loved me. . . . What I ask you to tell me is, whether you ever persuaded yourself to believe that I did *not* love you?"

He ceased speaking, but remained standing before her with his eyes earnestly fixed upon her face. But she did not answer him. She was too true to say yes, yet greatly, very greatly pained by the inference which her silence implied.

At length he again broke the silence, by saying in an accent which brought a great feeling of relief with it—

"Why, Clara! Why should we ever again attempt to delude each other? I have ventured to tell you, dearest, many strange truths. I have told you, that though I loved, I had not sufficient strength of character to marry you, while you were rich, and I was poor. I think not that I should have yielded to this feeling, which after all was but a very pitiful one, I think not that I should have yielded to it, had I stood alone. But the idea of my poor father mastered me! He had endured so many difficulties amongst us all, rather than submit to anything in the way of assistance, which he deemed derogatory to his long-cherished nobility, that I had not courage to do what might bring an imputation on *his* disinterested character, as well as on my own. I had seen one active young brother after another, doomed to gentlemanlike poverty, rather than accept of any occupation that compromised his aristocracy, and to be the first

of my race who should act as a free man, instead of submitting slavishly to be a noble one, required a firmness of character which, at that time, I certainly did not possess. Had you been poor, my sweet Clara, my position would have been comparatively free from difficulties; for such was my opinion, of the almost sublime superiority of your character, when compared with that of any other woman with whom I had ever conversed, and so great was my confidence in my own firmness and courage, that I was quite capable of imagining and proposing the very wildest schemes of philosophical poverty and independence, that ever entered the head of an enamoured boy to conceive! But the energy and freedom of spirit which *this* sort of independence required, was of a very different quality from that which would have enabled me to tell my father and my brothers that they were mistaken in their notions respecting what was really noble, and what a very small fraction of the human race had agreed among themselves to call so. I was at that time utterly incapable of venturing

to utter such doctrines in a circle so dear to me, but where I knew that every voice would be raised against me."

"And do you think these voices would be heard on the contrary side, were you to propose to marry me *now*, and that for no other reason than because I have lost my fortune?" returned Clara, shaking her head with rather a melancholy smile.

"Even so, the opposition would now cease to be of the same painfully suspicious nature. They would no longer shrink from the connexion from the idea that *money* was more precious in my eyes than an unsullied name. But you do not state the case fairly, my Clara. You have (the kind heavens be praised for it!)—you have lost your hateful great fortune, my sweet friend, but you have not yet learned to understand the difference between having no money at all and having a little."

"But I have *none*," returned Clara, laughing—"positively none! You see me living here, very snugly lodged, and not clothed in sackcloth and ashes, nor yet grown thin and wan for want of sufficient nourishment; yet,

nevertheless, you blunder sadly, my poor Henry, (she had never called him Henry before, and his eyes sparkled, and his colour rose as the welcome sound greeted his ear,)—you blunder very sadly if you suppose that I have the means of supplying these vulgar requisites of existence from any funds of my own. They are supplied to me by the benevolence of my aunt, and schoolmaster."

"Then I shall have the honour and glory of relieving these estimable friends from the *onus*!" said the young man, rubbing his hands with an air of hilarity that had something very youthful in it.

"Have you not heard," he continued, "that the Honourable Henry Octavius has inherited four hundred a year from his great uncle, the brother of his maternal grandmother, whose very name he has never heard mentioned three times in his life? Alas, Clara! with all my nobility, I am a person of very little consequence, or you would not have been permitted to remain in ignorance of so very important an event."

"Whatever may have been the cause of my

ignorance, ignorant I most certainly have been," replied Clara, without the slightest attempt to conceal the pleasure which this information gave her. For she too would have her family scruples, as well as her lover before her, and would have felt some reluctance at increasing the burden that had already fallen upon friends who she well knew would have more than shared their last farthing with her.

But, notwithstanding all her noble efforts to be reasonable, she was still quite sufficiently in love to think *four hundred a year* a most perfectly sufficient provision for the son of one of the proudest earls in Europe, and a woman who had recently been in possession of more tens of thousands than she could correctly remember.

"Is it possible, Henry?" she exclaimed, in a tone which spoke as much of happiness as surprise. But while the hand he had seized was still pressed to his lips, in acknowledgment as it were of her delighted reception of the news, she recollected that he had now less right than ever to make an imprudent marriage

let the nature of the imprudence be what it might; and suddenly withdrawing her hand, she said, in a very altered tone, "Are we not strongly deluding ourselves, my good friend? Have we, either of us, any right to suppose that the corn-merchant's daughter will be considered by your family as a fitting bride for you, merely because she is penniless?"

"You could not put that question to me, my Clara, if you had fully understood the feelings and motives of my conduct during the awful moments of your schoolmaster's visit to me. If I, and the adored wife of my choice, decide upon trusting our future happiness in life to our mutual affection, contented to brave all the difficulties of a very confined income, rather than not pass our lives together; there is no casuistry in the world capable of persuading an honest conscience that we shall thereby be acting dishonourably, for no one can impute any sordid or despicable motive to such an union. But far different would the case have been, could any have had even a possible reason to suspect that the nobleman's son had married the citizen's daughter, with

the hope and purpose of relieving the pecuniary difficulties of his numerous race, by means of her tens of thousands. My aching heart, Clara, has long reproached me with having sacrificed too much to the fear that such an imputation might be thrown upon my whole family, as well as upon myself; but this dark vision being removed, no earthly power remains which could lead me to doubt the righteousness, as well as the blessedness of such an union."

Clara looked earnestly into his face, and there was something like a smile upon her own. There was something, however, almost approaching vehemence, in his manner of speaking, for which she seemed half-inclined to chide him; but the feeling was changed as she looked at him—for his fine features had a solemnity in them which she had never seen before; and then she felt that the crisis of her destiny was indeed arrived . . . . She felt that she had pledged herself to be the wedded wife of the man who stood before her; and then, as a rapid backward glance took in all that had occurred to her since the death of

her father, it seemed as if it had all been but idle child's-play, when compared to the solemn event which had occurred to her during the last hour.

He too looked earnestly the while into her pale beautiful face, and seemed to read there all that was passing at her heart.

"Now then, at last we understand each other!" he exclaimed. "There is no room now, Clara, for any shadow of turning! Do you acknowledge yourself, Clara Holmwood, to be my affianced wife?"

Her answer was given partly by her speaking eyes, and partly by her gently pressing with her own hand that which, how she knew not, she held clasped in it.

And then on his side the solemn promise was solemnly ratified by the first kiss of love.

"I must go with you, Clara. I must walk with you, whithersoever you are going," he said: "I cannot see you leave me!" But her answer was, "No! Henry, no! . . . I could not at this moment encounter the agitation of being seen with you, and having to present

you even to the very dearest friend I have. And if perchance we met my schoolmaster, though no introduction would be needed, how should I get through the explanation? I *must* go home alone, Henry! The walk will be all too short for the work my head and heart will have to do in the course of it. But, to-morrow" . . .

"To-morrow I will be at Crowton Rectory, by ten o'clock. Let your breakfast be over, my Clara, and no one present with us but our schoolmaster. Will he recollect our last interview as well as I shall do?"

The clasped hands trembled in each other with something like a shudder, but this was followed by a smile . . . . A tender pressure and then another kiss! And then they parted.

CHAPTER XVI.

And what sort of a walk was it by which Clara reached her home? Had she ever taken such a walk before? No, assuredly, she had never taken such a walk before.

Over the same ground, indeed, she had paced, both alone and in very pleasant society, again and again; and she loved the walk, and knew every step of it; and where even white violets (not to mention blue ones) were sure of being found; and she well knew the long-felled tree, which still offered a very comfortable seat to a set of friends who wished to talk, or a solitary rambler who might like to repose.

But of all these well-known land-marks, Clara was now no more conscious than the bird which, high in air, swam over them.

Nor was this the only sense in which I might affirm that Clara had never taken such a walk before. I shall be accused of having selected a strange heroine (when the point which I have reached of my third volume is taken into consideration), should I confess that this was the first time in her life that she ever enjoyed the luxury of a really rural country walk, with her head and heart so full of happy, hopeful thoughts, as

> "*To make the coming hour o'erflow with joy,*
> *And pleasure drown the brim.*"

But such was very decidedly her case now. Not only did she know now, for the first time with *proper* certainty, that she was beloved; but, to confess the whole truth, it was now also that, for the first time, she knew, with proper certainty, that the only man she had ever seen, whom she felt it *possible* that she could love, *deserved* all the affection she could bestow on him.

On the whole, perhaps, her happiness was more like that of a dream than that of a walk; but fortunately she did not awake on arriving at Crowton Rectory.

On first entering her room, however, and seating herself in her own particularly favourite chair, she certainly very much doubted whether it would be possible for her to get out of it again, in order to smooth her dark curls, and prepare to appear at the dinner table with proper decorum. But before she had long enjoyed the luxury of this very pleasant doubt, she fortunately remembered all the affectionate inquiries concerning her health which she should have to answer, when aunt Sarah first, and then her schoolmaster, came to make their anxious personal examination of her alarming condition.

No sooner had this tremendous idea suggested itself, than she began brushing and combing, and placing and pinning, with an energy which it is probable that her mirror never reflected before.

But my unlucky heroine was quite deceived if she fancied that all this care and pains would

enable her to appear before the loving eyes she had to encounter, in such a condition as to "*pass muster.*"

In the first place, she looked as if she were either highly rouged, or in a violent fever; in the next, it very speedily became evident that either the sense of hearing, or the capability of comprehending what was said to her, was gone; for her answers were very nearly as little to the purpose as if the cat had mewed a reply.

"You are over-fatigued, Clara," said the rector, looking at her anxiously. "Have you been taking any unusually long walk, my dear?"

"Yes, perhaps I have," was her sagacious reply.

"Take a glass of wine with me, my dear," said her old friend, suiting the action to the word, and pushing towards her the glass he had filled as he spoke.

"Thank you!" said Clara, taking it almost eagerly. "God bless you, dearest and best!"

And then, having drank the wine, she looked at him with a smile so radiant in its happiness as to be more puzzling than all the rest.

"Will you let me now go into the drawing-

room at once, my dear master?" said she. "And will you come to me there as soon as you have dined? After I have spoken to you for five minutes alone, you shall send aunt Sarah to me. I have something that I want to tell you both; but in both cases it must be *tête-à-tête*. May I have my way?"

"I suppose we must indulge her, aunt Sarah," said the rector, laughing. "You may depend upon it that she has got something very extraordinary to communicate to us; and when this is done, perhaps she will eat some dinner."

Clara waited to hear no more, but made her escape with all convenient speed, nor was it long before her schoolmaster followed her, being quite as eager to hear, as she could be to tell her tale.

He had, however, found time during this short interval to forestall, very completely to his own satisfaction, the news which he expected to hear

"I was sure that Clarkson would fall in love with her," said the old man to himself, for he would have thought it cruel to let aunt

Sarah hear the news from any lips but those of Clara. "I have been fully expecting to hear of it for some time past," it was thus his soliloquy proceeded; "and I presume that to-day he has taken courage to declare himself.... Well!.... I don't know that she could have done better; she seems, dear creature! to have taken care of everybody before she lost her fortune, save and except her own dear precious self; and truly it will be a great comfort to me to see her married to a man so admirable in every way as I consider Clarkson to be; and who, doubtless too, has money enough to maintain her properly, or he would not have been so selfish as to propose to her!"

I do not believe that the Rector of Crowton ate either pudding, cheese, or dessert that day, for he followed his young patroness with very little loss of time; but he did not arrive before she was quite ready to receive him; and her news was evidently not of a nature to give her pain by the act of disclosure, for her beautiful eyes seemed to beam upon him with a degree of eloquent happiness which he had never read in them before.

She was lying on the sofa when he came in; and telling her not to get up, he drew a chair and placed himself closely in front of her.

The more than ordinary bloom had not left her cheek, but it was now again heightened as she took his venerable hand in hers, and said, "Can you guess my news, dear master?"

"Yes, my Clara!" replied the old man, promptly. "I think I can, I guess, as the Transatlantics say, I guess that you are going to be married, my dear."

"Oh, yes!" she replied, laughing, "I was quite sure you would say that! It is what everybody says when such a question is asked concerning an unmarried woman. Well! granted. So far you are right. But you must go farther before I give you any great credit for your perspicuity. You might say the same of every single woman you meet. They are all going to be married, perhaps, some day or other. The question I expect you to answer is this. To whom am I going to be married, dearest schoolmaster?"

"In my judgment, Clara, this is the easier question of the two," replied the old man.

"If *you* cannot guess, I do not think there is any one else likely to do it," she replied, turning her blushing face away from him.

"I am not quite certain of that, my dear," he replied, very sedately, and evidently without any notion of jesting.

"The gentleman I mean, Clara, is not only, in my opinion, the *most* likely, but, in fact, the only one at all likely to venture upon making you such a proposal."

"Indeed!" returned Clara, blushing, yet half inclined to laugh, at this allusion, as she supposed it to be, to the embassy upon which she had once dismissed him.

"Yes, indeed, my dear child, such is my decided opinion. I certainly think that we are remarkably fortunate in our neighbourhood, surrounded as we are by intelligent, agreeable people, nevertheless, Clara, Mr. Clarkson is certainly the only man I have met with here who could offer marriage to you, with any reasonable hope of being accepted."

"Mr Clarkson?" replied Clara, fixing her astonished eyes on the rector, "Mr Clarkson?" she repeated, but without adding another word.

"Am I wrong then?" said the old man, looking greatly puzzled. "Then you must not ask me, my dear, to guess again, for I will honestly confess to you, that I know no other man with whom we are both acquainted, to whom I should particularly wish to see you married."

"If a woman should happen to fall in love in early life," said Clara, after the silence of a moment, "if such a circumstance should accidentally occur, should it be generally considered as an insurmountable objection to her marrying the same person some years afterwards?"

The good rector stared at her very much as he might have done, had he felt anxious to ascertain whether her mind was or was not wandering in the condition commonly known by the name of delirium.

But the placid, happy smile that he encountered on her beautiful features, was so much more expressive of youthful, heartfelt happiness than any he had seen there since those features had lost what he might have called the *superficial* aspect of thoughtless and childish hilarity, that while he almost doubted the evidence of his own senses, he felt in-

clined to exclaim in the (Petrarchian) words of Lady Dacre,

"Let but the cheat endure, I ask not aught beside."

Clara permitted herself to enjoy his astonished aspect for a few seconds, and then she gently nodded her head in assent, as it were, to the idea which she felt sure had suggested itself to him.

He understood her, as well as she understood him, and his rejoinder was expressed by his exclaiming, "But how? How can it be possible, Clara? How did he discover your present residence? How can he, by any imaginable chance, have discovered that you were here?"

"Of that I am, as yet, totally ignorant," replied Clara. "I need not tell you," she added, lovingly fixing her affectionate eyes on his, "I need not tell you, I think, that I knew no more of his vicinity to us, when I met you at the breakfast-table this morning, than you did. When you went one way to visit your sick parishioner, I went another to call on Mary

Craddock. As usual, I entered the house without ceremony at the open window; but there was no Mary in the drawing-room, and on proceeding to the verandah, I found no Mary there either. But it was not unoccupied. A gentleman was there alone—*It was Mr. Hamilton!*

"Though more than three years have elapsed since we last met, neither of us, as it appeared, had forgotten the features of the other. And you have already been told, dear schoolmaster, the result of the conversation which followed, now you know all"

This little narrative, though very short, was very clear, very explicit.

The venerable rector had been distinctly told by Clara herself, that she was going to be married The abrupt suddenness with which this important event had been arranged had certainly somewhat startled him; but the subsequent discovery that it was an old attachment, and not a new one which was about to be thus solemnly sanctioned, startled him very considerably more.

If the venerable man had at that moment

been allowed time for meditation, he would have probably come to the conclusion at which many other venerable men have arrived before him, namely, that a woman's will has, now and then, a good deal of pertinacity in it.

He remained silent, however, for a short interval, after he had been made to comprehend the astounding fact, that the Honourable Henry Octavius, whom he had so resolutely lodged in the only *really* uncharitable corner of his heart for the last three years and a half, was accepted by his delicate and high-minded Clara as her future husband!

Some seconds passed before he felt courage even to look in her face, and during this interval his eyes were firmly fixed on the ground; and then he raised them, and looked at her steadily for a moment, without speaking.

She coloured, but she smiled too; and then he said, "he must have known thee better than I did, my child! . . . So suddenly too! So very suddenly! Have you had more than one interview with him, Clara?"

"And without your hearing of it!" she replied, with a look that in some little degree softened his heart towards her.

"But, surely, there must have been something disclosed, Clara; some mysterious cause for his conduct, of which we have hitherto known nothing?"

"I suspect that there is more truth in that surmise than does either of us credit, my dear master," replied Clara, shaking her head. "I truly believe that we neither of us knew, nor understood very much of Henry Hamilton's motives for his conduct."

"And yet they must, I presume, have been very easily made obvious," replied the old man, with somewhat less than his usual gentleness, "for it seems that it took but little time to convince you that his previous conduct was not such as to excite any very lasting feeling of displeasure."

"Would it have taken longer, my dear master, had the circumstances of the case been reversed?" said Clara.

"Do not speak to me in riddles, my dear child," replied the rector, slightly knitting his brows. "I shall never understand you, if you do."

"At any rate, I will explain my riddle," she replied, changing her position on the sofa,

and making him, with a little gentle violence, take a seat beside her.

"What I mean to ask you," she resumed, "is this. Would it, in your estimation, have been more easy either for you, or for me, to have forgiven Henry, if he had refused to marry me when I had no fortune, but had come forward to propose the doing so, on hearing that I had become rich, instead of doing exactly the reverse? When I had much, and he had nothing, a feeling of honour (mistaken, if you will) caused him to shrink from the idea of enriching himself from my funds. He was very young, dear master, and had been reared amid so many pecuniary difficulties, that the idea of being relieved from them all by his union with a wealthy wife, had become a perfect *bugbear* to him.

"This feeling had, moreover, been constantly strengthened by the principles of his family. The eldest son, with his long-descended title, and fine person, might have more than once restored the fortunes of his race, could he have submitted to do so, by means of a profitable marriage; and his not doing so, was

cited through the whole of his numerous race, as the crowning glory of their noble escutcheon

"Would Henry have proved his feeling any very tender love for me, had he brought me, and my city wealth, among them?

"But let that question rest; it may be that we think differently on the subject. But before you pass final judgment upon him, you should hear the sequel. By some accident or other, he hears that I have lost the whole of this vast fortune, and that, but for the charity of friends, I must be either working for my daily bread, or dying from the want of it.

"Meanwhile, Henry himself has very unexpectedly inherited a small estate from a distant and very aged relative, by whom he never expected to be so distinguished.

"He named the annual amount to me, which, to say the truth, I have totally forgotten; but I remember that he said . . . . 'Small as it is, Clara, I think we can live upon it.'

"This is what passed between us this morning, my dear, dear friend; and if you can generously make up *your* mind to forgive *my*

prompt forgiveness of his sins, I shall become not only happier than I have ever been in my whole life before; but, as far as I can judge of human destinies, by what I have seen, I should be happier far than any one I have ever had the pleasure of being acquainted with."

And here she ceased speaking, at least in words; but she looked up into the loving face of her schoolmaster, and felt that she was forgiven.

"You have made out a strong case, my child, and have pleaded the cause exceedingly well," said the old man, stooping down, and affectionately kissing her. "And now then, the next thing we shall have to do," he added with a sigh, "will be to pack you up, and send you away again."

"On the contrary," replied Clara, all her embarrassment being over, and nothing but happiness being legible in her charming face. "On the contrary, I am by no means certain that you will not be called upon to house the new-married pair! The snug little farm that is to maintain us, is somewhere in Wales, I believe. Henry said something about col-

lieries, and I perfectly well remember, too, that he added that we could not possibly live *there*. So, unless you will take us in, I think we must go into some snug little lodging or other."

"Snug little lodging!" exclaimed the rector proudly, and now looking almost as happy as Clara herself; "where can you find a better snuggery than this, Mrs. Henry Octavius Hamilton? I will give you leave to pack up, and depart, as soon as it is discovered. But, till then, my dear, notwithstanding all the young Honourable's sins and offences, we will just make the experiment, and see if we cannot contrive to make you comfortable here, as long as the old rector lives; and when he goes, my dear patroness, I am afraid that you must go too. But it will be time enough then to look after your collieries."

And what more was there now left to be said and done, save and except the very simple process of preparing, with proper decorum, for the wedding day?

Notwithstanding Henry Hamilton's somewhat unintelligible scamper to the new world,

for in fact no one, but his confidential tutor, was aware that he was endeavouring to run away from himself; he was both well loved and well esteemed by his family, and when his great-uncle's unexpected bequest enabled him to return to Europe, without having the dread of being a burthen to his father before his eyes, he was received by them all with cordial affection, and cordial congratulations on the blessed chance which had made him an independent man.

Nothing could possibly be in better style on all sides than the preliminary correspondence which announced his present engagement. That the affianced pair were to live in the delightful rectory, which had been her happy home, sufficed to shew the Harrington family that the "beautiful Clara's" connexions were clerical.

And to this they had, of course, no objection whatever. The earl had to boast of two pre-eminently learned bishops in his pedigree, and his countess rarely suffered a year to pass over her without spending a very comfortable month of it with her widower uncle, the Dean of B., who, being not only childless, but

wealthy also, brought the noble family in too pleasant contact with the church to prevent the announcement of a future residence for Henry at *a rectory* from being at all objectionable.

And what did all Clara's near and dear friends say to the sudden announcement of her immediate marriage with this Honourable Henry Octavius?

Clara Holmwood had not, perhaps, been always quite so happy as she had seemed to be. She had not "*wiped her eyes upon the public*," as a certain noble poet was said to have done, and it is therefore probable, that those around her gave her credit for more perfect heart's ease than she really enjoyed.

But a marked difference was perceptible in her now. Her schoolmaster perceived it, and so did Lady Amelia Wharton. The former became thereby much more fully aware of what she had really suffered than he had ever been before, and loved her, if possible, better than ever, for having betrayed so little while feeling so much.

To Lady Amelia, who had never heard the

name of Henry Hamilton mentioned in connexion with that of her friend, it now appeared, a good deal to her surprise, that the quiet, even-tempered Clara was one of those who required the *awakening* caused by a shaft from the quiver of Cupid, in order to make evident all the brilliance of talent, and bright hilarity of temper with which she was endowed.

Aunt Sarah, too, looked the very personification of contentment and joy. It was not in her nature to grumble, or even to feel very much *dis*concerted at anything, but she had sometimes looked at her beautiful Clara till she had wondered why it was that no single gentleman seemed to think her so charming as her old aunt did

And even Annie seemed almost to forget that man was made to mourn, and woman also; nay, she even gazed on Clara's brightened eye with very considerable pleasure, as well as admiration, quietly smiling as she thought how exquisitely beautiful the fine dark eyes of her own baby would look when lighted up in the same manner.

In short, no quiet little wedding was ever

prepared for under more pleasant auspices; and friend Clarkson, the voluminous letter-writer, though he said little or nothing on the subject to anybody, was not the least-pleased individual among the lookers-on.

CHAPTER XVII.

And who among my readers, if I am lucky enough to have any,—who, among the most experienced of novel-readers, will patiently endure the being told, that all this long-waited-for happiness was founded on a vision? A mere blunder and delusion?

Yet this fact I am called upon to disclose before I can bring my story to an end.

It shall be done, however, as briefly as possible.

But little preparation, as may easily be supposed, was deemed necessary to prepare the rooms which Lady Amelia and Annie had occupied at the rectory, in such a way as to

make them convenient as a sort of separate domain for the especial accommodation of Henry and Clara; and such as they were, they went on rapidly.

The day fixed for the marriage was at the distance of only one week, when Lady Amelia received a sudden announcement from her uncle, Sir William Lawrence, who had not left her above a month, that he was about to return, though only for a few days, and should be accompanied by a friend, who might find a bed at the neat village inn, if her ladyship's premises were not ample enough to receive him as a night guest

Now, though Sir William Lawrence had become a well-established friend and favourite with all and every one of the set who surrounded the rectory, the announcement of his return among them at that particular moment was decidedly embarrassing.

Had he been coming alone, indeed, it would have been far otherwise; for he not only loved his own belongings, as he termed the three generations of nieces, too sincerely not to be loved affectionately in return, but his admira-

tion of Clara was so really exalted, and so deeply sincere, that neither herself nor her schoolmaster could be insensible of it.

Nevertheless, the moment *was* an unlucky one.

However, they were all a great deal too happy to grumble much, though the notion of this stranger-friend was very decidedly disagreeable to them all. "My uncle will be terribly disappointed if he does not see you as soon as he arrives, Clara, and yet I really do not like to ask you to come to us," said Lady Amelia. "Hamilton, I am quite sure, will *not* come," added her desponding ladyship, shaking her head; "and you are so very nearly within the category of those whom Heaven has joined together, that I do not at all approve the idea of putting you asunder. What are we to do? What are we to say?"

Now it so happened, that every individual of that very closely-cemented party, save one, still remained totally ignorant of the very important part which Sir William Lawrence had performed in placing them in the supremely happy position they now occupied.

Henry Hamilton knew, though nobody else did, that had it not been for Sir William's disclosures to his friend Clarkson, he should at that moment have still felt himself to be the same solitary, blighted being which he had been from the hour in which he had bent his pale face, as a *congée*, to Clara's ambassador, to the hour in which he had become the affianced lover of the only woman who had ever touched his heart.

This recollection by no means disposed him to join in the sort of general regret, or rather lamentation, that he heard around him on the subject of the worthy baronet's ill-timed arrival.

But neither did it inspire any wish to meet the old gentleman, for the first time, not only in the presence of the perfect stranger whom he announced as his companion, but in the presence, also, of a whole host of loving friends, not one of whom knew anything about the grateful and affectionate feelings which he was longing to express, or who could by possibility comprehend why he should do anything more on being presented to him, than set his heels

together, and give an unmeaning inclination of the head.

Having given a rapid glance over the various difficulties of the case, and conscious, perhaps, that when a wedding is a-foot the "*promessi sposi*" are always listened to with attention, he ventured to say, "You are all exceedingly embarrassed to know what you are to do with me, and by all I have heard of Sir William Lawrence, I should certainly let you all be embarrassed still, were the moment of his arrival with his stranger-friend the only one in which I could have a chance of being presented to him, for I know *no man* whose acquaintance I am more anxious to acquire But nevertheless, I strongly vote for his not being startled by a reception *en grand comité*, then and there to be informed of the approaching espousals of his well-beloved friend Clara, and presented to the happy, but unknown individual who is about to take possession of her. If you will permit me, my dear friends," he continued, taking the hand of the not far-distant Clara in his, as if tacitly to propitiate her accordance with his very rational proposal, "I

will take this time for accepting my friend Clarkson's often-repeated invitation to pass a day or two with him in his pretty parsonage, which, though under the process of beautification and repair, has still a snug corner for a friend. What say you? Will you first give me leave of absence, and then confer the still more precious favour of recall?"

The proposal was much too reasonable, and much too well-timed, to meet any opposition. Clara returned the pressure of the loving hand which had taken hers, exactly in the manner to make Henry comprehend that she approved his proposal. And the said proposal was accordingly immediately acted upon.

Henry Hamilton was safely lodged in the reserved corner of Mr. Clarkson's parsonage, several hours before Sir William Lawrence made his appearance at the pretty dwelling of Lady Amelia Wharton.

And his friend too, he made his appearance also; but great indeed was the astonishment, I might say without much exaggeration, great was the dismay of the little party assembled in that drawing-room to receive them (con-

sisting of Lady Amelia, Annie and Clara), at perceiving that the dear stranger friend thus unceremoniously introduced, was the man at whose name they had all been taught to tremble, and who was decidedly about the last person in the world whom they could have expected to see brought to them by Sir William Lawrence, as being still his *particular friend*

More than ever had the mother, and the friend of poor Annie now reason to rejoice at the successful caution which had kept her ignorant of every circumstance connected with the dreadful fate of her husband, save that she had lost him; more than ever had they reason to rejoice that the name of M. Roche was still unknown to her, save as that of a very accomplished gentleman, to whom they had been under many obligations.

The reader, perhaps, may be already aware that Sir William Lawrence, though certainly one of the most amiable men in the world, was not in any way particularly distinguished by the valuable quality usually called discretion. Had it not been for this deficiency, he would

assuredly not have brought M. Roche into his niece's drawing-room for the express purpose of giving him an opportunity of explaining some of the circumstances of his own conduct in a way that might lessen the heavy load of blame which he was aware had been thrown upon him.

No sooner, however, had Sir William caught sight of the greatly altered (though recently much improved) countenance of poor Annie, then he became conscious of the blunder he had made, and starting from his chair before he had fairly placed himself in it, he approached Clara with a hasty step, and taking her hand, which he drew without ceremony under his own arm, he began leading her towards the door, saying, *sotto voce*, to M. Roche as he passed him, "You must come with us, my dear Roche. I told you, as you know, that I could not attempt to explain matters to this young lady without your assistance. You know of old, that I am by no means clear-headed about such matters, and in this particular case, the whole thing is a most mysterious puzzle to me still. So, come along."

M. Roche immediately prepared to obey him, leaving his place, and bowing to Lady Amelia and her daughter with his usual graceful ease, and certainly without any shadow of embarrassment upon his handsome features.

Although it is quite true that my heroine had rather more than forgiven the "gay deceiver" who had so cleverly metamorphosed her from rich to poor, the sight of all his accustomed easy gaiety, after what had passed, was certainly rather offensive than pleasing. Their last interview, and the playful style in which he had flourished round his head the paper which he had prepared for her signature, recurred to her with rather disagreeable distinctness. It would have been very difficult, however, for any one to have preserved (civilly) any very strict air of reserve with M. Roche

He appeared himself to be in a state of such very perfect good humour, that the tone was perfectly infectious, and Clara contented herself by muttering, not very respectfully perhaps, the word "FRENCHMAN," but not in a tone to be audible to either of her companions.

She was not left long, however, to meditate upon national distinctions; for Sir William Lawrence, after very politely seating her in the most comfortable arm chair which the room afforded, turned to his still evidently intimate friend, M. Roche, and said, of course in the language of that accomplished gentleman, "Now then, my dear Roche, endeavour to make Miss Holmwood understand somewhat more clearly than I do myself, the real state of the case respecting her fortune"

"The most effectual way of doing so," replied M. Roche drawing a very small paper enclosure from his waistcoat pocket, and presenting it to her with a bow, which only a Frenchman could make—"the most effectual way of making this charming young lady both comprehend and profit by the intelligence I bring her, is by placing this small, but somewhat important packet in her hands."

Clara mechanically received the little packet thus presented to her, but did not open it till Sir William, from whom her eyes had seemed to ask what she was to do with it, said, "You had better open it, my dear. I know that

there is some mysterious importance attached to it . . . but of what kind I do not know."

Thus authorized, Clara unfolded the little packet, and found within it a very small mass of fragments, evidently of paper, but of paper which had almost been entirely consumed by fire.

"What is this, sir?" said she, with a slight trace of such a frown upon her brow, as the perception of an untimely jest is apt to produce.

In reply to this question, M. Roche rose, and approached her.

"By your leave, young lady," he said, daintily taking the apparently worthless little packet from her hands; and then, approaching the light, he carefully drew from among the fragments a tiny scrap of writing-paper, on which, despite the action of fire, written characters were still distinctly visible.

"Do you recognise those letters, mademoiselle?" demanded M. Roche, with a fascinating smile

Clara looked attentively at the fragments, and changed colour as she replied, "Yes, sir.

I recognise some of the letters of my own name, written by myself."

"Quite right, *ma belle demoiselle*," returned M. Roche, with his most captivating smile.

"And now," he added, daintily enclosing her hand, and what it held in both his own; "let me keep you a prisoner for a minute or two, while I preach you a lecture. When a gentleman comes to wait upon you, concerning money matters, never mind whether he be old or young, a Frenchman, or one of a much less susceptible nation; never mind whether he be an adorer of beauty (and here he gently pressed the hand he held), or one brutal enough to be indifferent to it; in no case, *ma belle amie*, must you ever for a moment permit yourself to forget the business before you. Your having never received, or your having failed to follow such advice as *this*, led, upon one occasion, to the risk of making a gentleman of the most refined feelings, and the very nicest honour, behave very like a . . . . in short, like a man of inferior quality. But happily, circumstances were more favourable to him than your pretty playfulness. You

may, perhaps, already guess, my dear Miss Clara, that I am alluding to myself. Such, indeed, is the fact. When our much-loved and ever-regretted Victor was struggling against the difficulties which impeded his admission as a partner to the (then) very promising concern, in which he was only a clerk, you most generously offered to assist him with the necessary funds. But some scruples of delicacy on the part of my friend, Sir William, or his noble niece, prevented your offered aid from being accepted; and it then occurred to me, *ma chère demoiselle*, that I might assist my friend Victor, and, at the same time, reward your noble generosity, by obtaining your signature to a document which would constitute you also a partner in the concern, of which we all then thought so highly. But I knew your charming sex too well not to have been aware that you would be frightened to death at the idea of going into business on your own account. And therefore, while asking for your signature, I diverted your attention from so painfully grave a proposal, by . . . " And here the gay and graceful M.

Roche enacted the merry manœuvre so well remembered by Clara.

Here the orator paused for a moment, his handsome features embellished by a gay smile, and then he added—"Of course, my fair lady, you guess the rest. I really thought I had done a very clever thing, as certain of proving beneficial to you as to the dear, unhappy boy whose rashness finally defeated all my plans and all my hopes. That our mining concern is *not* exactly the very glorious and successful enterprise which I believed it to be when" and here the smiling orator repeated his own gay flourish with his hand above his head . . ." I am ready to confess, but, nevertheless, I still believe that, by the help of your very powerful name, *ma belle associée*, we might have been able to get over our difficulties, and still boast ourselves the most successful joint-stock company in France, had nothing occurred to prevent it. But no sooner did my dear, sensitive Victor conceive the idea that you, as a co-partner in the concern, were likely to be injured by it, than despair seized upon him, and . . . . the horrible catastrophe is already

known to you, and I will not torture either you or myself by dwelling upon it. I confess that the tidings of his self-inflicted death had a tremendous effect upon me! I believe I am what the world calls an eccentric man; and it is possible that I may often treat lightly many subjects which are usually treated gravely; but as a proof that I am *au fond* a man of honour, I have great pleasure in now seeing in that fair hand of yours the fragments of the signature I so gaily won from you. As to the concern itself, I still think it will stand its ground. No act has yet been proved, in the least degree, approaching bankruptcy. Do not think, however, that I am endeavouring to coax you out of another signature. It is never very desirable, I think, for ladies to involve themselves in commercial concerns; and nothing but my very strong affection for poor dear Victor Dormont would have induced me to lead you into any undertaking of that nature."

And here the gentlemanlike, voluble, smiling orator ceased; with no more idea, apparently, of having confessed himself to be an atrocious

rogue, than if he had been recounting the particulars of a merry game of play, in which he had been engaged with a pretty baby.

The reader must be left to judge for himself of the effect produced by his narrative on Clara.

His thinly-veiled villany was discerned as clearly by her, as by the deeply-disgusted, and profoundly-shocked Sir William Lawrence; but the difference it produced on their respective feelings was very great.

The liberal-minded, honourable, and generous old baronet literally shuddered, as he remembered that the introduction of this scoundrel to his nieces, and their unsuspicious guest, was his own doing; nevertheless, painful as this repentant feeling certainly was, it could not altogether conquer the satisfaction—it might be fairly called the *delight*—of knowing that this charming Clara, whom he had learnt to admire and to love, more and more with every day that passed over them, was not to be eventually a sufferer by this hateful man's half-accomplished villany.

The old gentleman's feeling on this subject

was too strong to be controlled; and rising from his chair, he crossed the room to the place where she sat, and putting a hand on each of her shoulders, bent down and kissed her forehead.

But how was he to interpret the look with which this cordial caress was received? She looked up into his face with an aspect which indicated a very great probability that she was about to weep, and had she been alone, there can be no doubt but that such would, in truth, have been the manner in which her emotion at hearing that her fortune was still in her own hands would have been manifested.

But even if she had yielded to this weakness, the good old gentleman, being a tolerable Shakspearian scholar, would probably have expected the next moment to hear her exclaim—"I am a fool to cry for what I am glad of!" but he would have blundered had he done so.

Her thoughts were of a far different character.

Her first feeling was indeed a very painful one. It seemed to her that the mysterious power which we call FATE had declared itself

against her. Several very painful minutes had elapsed before she became conscious that she was expected to make some reply to the information thus conveyed to her; and when this interval had passed, she was very greatly at a loss how to express herself in answering the harangue which had been addressed to her.

Was she to thank M. Roche for the information which, while it very clearly proved him to be a very accomplished rogue, informed her that the very perfect happiness which had seemed a short hour ago to await her, was no longer within her reach? Yet, even while this terrible idea rose before her in the self-same form which had poisoned more than three years of her still young life, a gleam of hope flashed with the brightness of lightning into a darkened room. She felt it to be *possible* that Henry loved her too well now to be able to resign her; and as this thought nestled into and took possession of her heart, she rose from her chair, curtsied very *gracefully*, if not quite *graciously*, to M. Roche, as she passed him, and left the room.

The Frenchman looked considerably puzzled by this manœuvre.

"I think she might have had the grace to thank me for my news," said he, addressing the evidently delighted Sir William Lawrence. "What could have made her run off so?"

"No feeling of ingratitude to you, be very sure of that, Monsieur Roche," replied Sir William. "She is doubtless gone to communicate the joyful tidings to Lady Amelia and our poor Annie, and you surely will not blame her for that?"

"Certainly not," returned the Frenchman, with what he intended to be a perfectly well-satisfied smile, but which, nevertheless, had a very visible mixture of disappointment in it. "I only wish," he added, "that my poor Victor had known what that abrupt-mannered young lady does now, and it might have saved his precious life!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

CLARA's first idea had been to fly to her writing-desk for the purpose of instantly informing her lover of the dreadful calamity which had befallen them, in the shape of a restored fortune! But ere she had written many words she became embarrassed by the difficult subject. Her own heart felt as heavy as lead; and she knew that in this respect, at least, the feelings of Henry would be in sympathy with her own.

The embarrassing part of the subject consisted in the very near approach to *absurdity* which the cause of this misery presented.

Had the case been completely reversed—had their long-concealed attachment been at length

emboldened to declare itself by the fancied acquisition of some "needfu' cash". . . . which acquisition had been subsequently found to be a mistake, Clara fancied she could have written a most proper and edifying letter on the subject; but now she was totally at a loss to find words expressive of the dreadful event, which would not have some mixture of absurdity in them.

In fact, after sitting before the said desk for some minutes, she at length pushed it back in despair, and determined to postpone the task of writing till she could consult her friend the rector on the best manner of letting Henry understand that she was prepared to release him from his engagement, if he still considered her city wealth as an obstacle to their marriage.

Having thus very wisely abandoned a task which seemed in her estimation to hover so strangely between tragedy and farce, as to render it very perilous ground to enter upon, she determined to seek Lady Amelia, and communicate M. Roche's very extraordinary disclosure to her.

But in doing this, she could look for no help under her present strange embarrassment; for confidential on most subjects as their intercourse had been, Clara had never felt courage to discuss with her noble friend the very painful circumstances which had blighted her early hopes. My heroine really was, in many respects, a very frank and noble-minded young woman; but ignorant (as the phrase goes) as she was of the world, she was nevertheless perfectly well aware that the circumstance of a young lady making a proposal of marriage to a gentleman was not in accordance with generally received notions of propriety; while the additional circumstance of the said proposals having been refused, could not be supposed to render the relation of the adventure more agreeable.

That my strangely educated, and, on many points, profoundly ignorant heroine, was extremely likely to make very egregious blunders on many of the social laws amidst which she lived, without always being sufficiently instructed to understand them, is quite certain. But her position in the mansion of her

guardian had been so isolated, that while she had less chance of correcting her blunders there than she might have had, where her daily intercourse with better-informed persons than herself had been more familiar, she was spared any painful consciousness of her own ignorance; for the shouts of laughter often produced by her ignorance, were, of course, only indulged *en petit comité;* and probably the time chosen for this indulgence by Mrs. Brixbourg and her fair daughter, was usually that when the sacred morning *clôture* of the dining-parlour was most certain of retaining their ridiculous inmate in safe durance.

So that it generally happened, that during the hours of her very varied and somewhat learned studies, the ladies of the family were becoming day after day only more firmly convinced that Clara Holmwood was very nearly an idiot.

Some of these dining-room hours, however, were not, as the reader already knows, devoted solely to study; for it was there that, with her schoolmaster on one side of her, and Henry Hamilton on the other, she had been

taught to love, and to believe herself loved in return. But although the adventure, or the very decided misadventure rather, which was the consequence of this, gave very sufficient evidence that the schoolmaster's system of education was not altogether a safe one, error and blundering were not quite the only results of it.

Assuredly, if things had been managed differently, she would have been spared the pang which she endured when her reluctant, but devoted nuncio returned from his embassy to the mansion of Lord Springwood.

But that pang had been caused fully as much, perhaps somewhat more, by the consciousness that she had made *him* suffer, than from what, even at that critical moment, she suffered herself; and she would have willingly submitted her hand (at any rate her left hand) to amputation, to have recalled the act which exposed him to it. But not for a moment had her heart or head received the real conviction, that Henry Hamilton did not love her; and though the reasons assigned for his refusing her offered hand, were as incom-

prehensible to her as the most recondite chemical secret that was ever developed by an experiment, she felt perfectly and instantly persuaded that it was *conscientious*, and being so, could no more be an object of resentment to her, than any other conscientious act, the nature of which she perfectly understood; for her faith in the truthfulness of his character was too firmly established to render her doubting it possible.

And therefore it was that no feeling of resentment had ever been mixed with her disappointment. She had only lamented the difference of their respective educations.

The first feeling which now came upon her, when she learnt the strange reverse which had again befallen her, was, very decidedly, one of alarm; and if it could be said that she at that moment formed a resolution, it certainly was to release him from an engagement made under a delusion.

But the same true estimate of character which had preserved her love for him unshaken, under the desperate trial of having

that love refused, soon came to comfort her now.

Henry had been free when he had refused to marry her, but he was free no longer. Nor was it by any will but his own, that he had now bound himself.

A very short space of time devoted to meditation on this fact, sufficed to re-assure her. She was perfectly ready and willing to bow her will, if not her intellect, to the doctrine which he had imbibed from his noble relatives, but she no longer felt any fear that even their doctrine would lead him to do wrong.

All these thoughts arose, were dwelt upon, and finally digested, before Clara reached the morning sitting-room of Lady Amelia, and this process having been very satisfactorily passed, she turned round when within a few steps of the door, very sanguine in the hope that her very sensible and right-judging friend would never hear any particulars respecting the first period of her early love.

Instead, therefore, of opening the door, she turned away from it, and taking refuge in the

pretty incipient library, where pens and ink were always to be found, she sat herself quietly down, and wrote the following short epistle to her dear Henry:

"I have strange tidings to tell you. I fear you will consider yourself pre-doomed by relentless destiny to be a strangely-tormented man. But before I disclose my news, let me promise, in all sincerity, that I hold myself bound to release you from any promise which you may feel that you were tempted to make under a delusion.

"I have just learned the astounding intelligence that I am an heiress still! Yes, Henry, exactly the same overgrown city fortune from which you shrank, terrified, somewhat more than three years ago! If the same feeling possesses you still, SAY SO.

"If this city money, which clings so pertinaciously to me, be really an annoyance, greater than you can bear with resignation, tell me so.

"Lady Amelia knows nothing of what has previously passed between us on the subject,

but she will, of course, be told immediately by her uncle, that the money has been restored.

"Yours, dearest Henry,

"With unchangeable sincerity,

"CLARA HOLMWOOD."

To this letter, which was sent by express to the house of Mr. Clarkson, Clara received no answer. But, just as she was sitting down at the rectory dinner-table, together with the rector and aunt Sarah, the Honourable Henry Octavius Hamilton rushed rather suddenly into the room.

Less than half a glance was sufficient to remove whatever doubt might rest upon the mind of my heroine, respecting her future fate.

She coloured a little for a moment, and then ventured to fix her eyes upon his, and *then* they both smiled.

"You have not dined, I hope, my dear Hamilton?" said the hospitable rector, starting from the table, and himself placing a chair for him at it.

"No, dear schoolmaster!" replied Henry.

"I am come here on purpose to dine with you."

And they did dine together, very happily; and they talked together afterwards, with no great symptoms of embarrassment or annoyance in any of the party.

And so they married, and lived long, and were very happy. Not any one of Henry's large family, however, being ever fully convinced that Clara's favourite little family-anecdote respecting Henry's high-minded rejection of her hand, was anything but a very facetious joke of their beautiful sister-in-law's invention. But it is with great pleasure that I am able to assure my readers, that there was so much wisdom and discretion in the manner in which this obnoxious wealth was employed, that none of the numerous race who had thus become allied to its owner, were ever heard to express any regret at the circumstance.

THE END.

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